



# John the Baptist



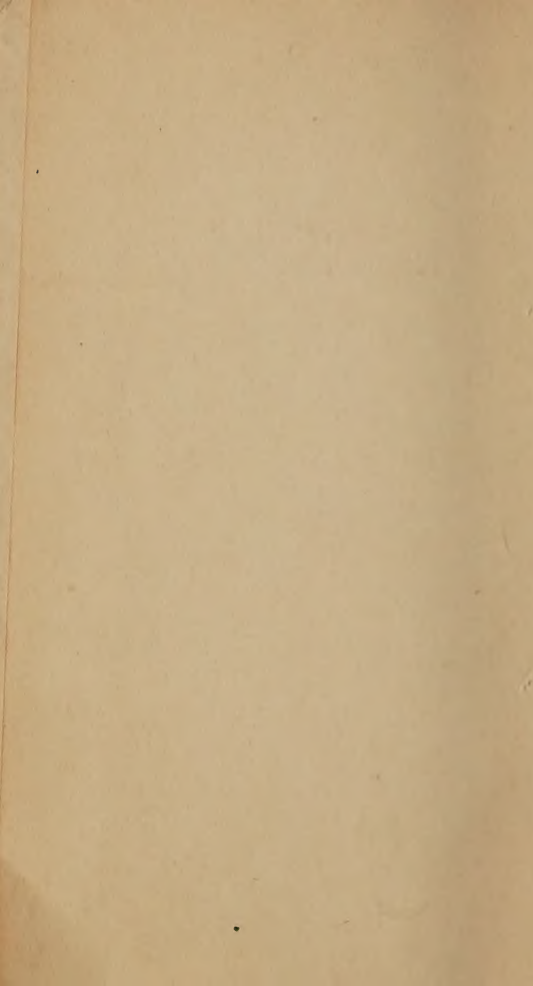
Galen B. Royer

*"Thy Word is a Lamp  
unto my Feet  
and  
A Light unto my Path."  
— David*

*"Follow Me, as I Follow  
Christ."—Paul.*









JOHN  
THE BAPTIST





John the Baptist.

# JOHN THE BAPTIST

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VOLUME VIII

Bible Biographies for the Young

(Copyrighted)

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BY GALEN B. ROYER

*Author of "Joseph the Ruler," "Samuel the Judge," "Ruth the  
Truehearted," "Jesus the Savior," and other Bible  
Biographies for the Young.*

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**BY GALEN B. ROYER:**

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| Joseph the Ruler  | Daniel the Fearless  |
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**PREFACE FOR SERIES.**

IN the varied field of literature for the Sunday-school scholar there are no short biographies of the worthy men of God. Yet in their lives there is much to inspire the young. If this series of Bible Biographies will in a measure fill the place unoccupied, if it will, in a small way, acquaint a few young people with the noble lives once lived, the purpose for which it is published will be accomplished. And if, perchance, one or more of the series should inspire some one to strive still harder to live that better life, may all the praise be to Him who kept his faithful children in the past, and keeps to-day all those who trust Him.

G. B. R.

## PREFACE.

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OF the real life of John the Baptist and the nature of his work perhaps far too little is known by Christian people who have reached manhood and womanhood. That being the case, it is but natural that young people are no better acquainted with this truly great man.

John is great as few men are. Most great men are so because they led a movement or reform that was already fixed in the hearts of the people. John is greater than these because he took up an entirely new cause, one about which the people had exactly opposite ideas from those given by him, and yet he was able to call many to follow his teachings.

The secret of John's success lay in his denying self and serving God. The same terms are offered every young person to-

day. May the perusal of this imperfect biography help each reader to give up more for Christ, and thus glorify Him whom the Baptist so well glorified.

GALEN B. ROYER.

Dovecot,

Elgin, Illinois, March 14, 1904.

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While different authors were consulted, special credit is here given to Houghton's excellent work on John the Baptist for references and suggestions.

TO MY TWO SONS,

DANIEL L.,

JOHN G.,

AND TO THE MANY YOUNG PEOPLE WHO SEEK  
TO LIVE A LIFE FOR GOD, IS THIS  
VOLUME AFFECTIONATELY  
DEDICATED.

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## I.

### HEROD THE GREAT.

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GOD'S way of showing His presence to the Jews was in some strange manner which might be called a miracle. It was by the cloud in the daytime when all about was a clear sky, and by a pillar of fire by night when all around was a star-studded heaven, that He showed His presence to the people whom He was leading to the promised land. It was by fire coming down from heaven that He proved to Elijah and the prophets of Baal that He was there on Mount Carmel. It was through the visions of Samuel that He sent a message unto Eli at one time, and to the people of that day, many times.

In spite of this wonderful way of showing His presence and power, and in spite of the fact that He pleaded with them not to do so, Israel would go off into sin and idolatry. A prophet would rise up and tell them of their folly, but they

would heed him not. Then Jehovah would permit them to be carried away captive and punished until they would cry out in their misery for mercy. With this they would be restored into God's favor and enjoy the good of the land. But thus, time after time, did the Jews, in their long and interesting history, suffer simply because they heeded not God.

The last time they were carried away as captives they remained so long and they were punished so severely that they ever after that refused to worship idols. But from this reform they drifted into another sin, perhaps as bad. They did not worship God from the heart. The priests and doctors of the law took great delight in splitting hairs and discussing fine points as to the manner in which each Jew should serve the Lord. To such an extent was this carried on that it became next to impossible for any one not to violate some of these many laws thus declared.

Before this life of the formal was really entered upon fully, Malachi, the last

of the prophets, spoke a word of warning to the people, because they kept back from God what was lawful for Him to have. He pleaded earnestly that they should prove their God and see if there would not be coming down from the windows of heaven more than they could contain. But the people heeded not the words of the prophet. The Lord shut up the prophecy to the people and no message of any kind, no vision, or anything from the Lord, came to the people until four hundred years had passed away.

It was a long and painful silence to every pious Jew who loved the Lord truly and knew what the absence of the voice of their God meant. They realized that He was with them no longer as He had been of old. Some of them prayed fervently for His return; but their prayers were of no avail. One set of people after another passed into their graves without seeing Israel restored. This was all the sadder, when, with longing hearts, they opened the Scriptures

and read the promise of One who should redeem Israel and restore unto them the throne of David. Why does He not come? Why, oh, why does not Jehovah hear them and send the long-looked-for Messiah?

During these long years of waiting, covering four centuries of yearning after the Redeemer on the part of a few, and a drifting into coldness and formal worship on the part of the many, Israel lost her power in the world. Slowly but surely other nations were making inroads upon her sacred homeland. Division among themselves into sects and parties so weakened them that they became the easy victim of an outside and heathen power.

Thus it is hinted how the power of Rome came to be over the land of Palestine in the times of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

The power itself was at the centre or capital of the empire, at Rome, in Italy. That was far to the west. Yet the Jewish nation, which at one time was the fav-

ored of God and free from all outside powers, was under a strong hand which exacted from them heavy taxes and laid great burdens upon them in addition to the great task of obeying all their own laws and traditions or sayings of the elders. These taxes were collected by the Roman governor placed at Jerusalem, who also had a force of Roman soldiers to help him keep peace and quiet in the land. Now and then a man living in the province would, by some deed of bravery in behalf of Cæsar at Rome, gain for himself the right to rule his own people.

This privilege to rule was given to Antipas, a man who governed Idumea, the southern end of what is now called Palestine. He had a son by the name of Herod. When about twenty-five years old the father secured him the throne of Galilee, a province around the lake by that name. His bravery as a soldier, as well as his manner of governing the people caused them all to like him greatly. He governed with great care, and before many years this popular young

ruler found himself King of all the country now known as Palestine. He was called the king of Judea. He made his new capital at Jerusalem.

This Herod during his lifetime married ten wives. By five of them he had children. By his wife Malthace, a woman of Samaria, he had two sons, one of whom, Antipas, by name, became ruler of Galilee, and played an important part in the life of John the Baptist.

Herod had some good traits. Few men ever lived who in so short a time did so much for the general appearance of the country. Even in that rough, hilly and mountainous land he built up cities in honor of Cæsar at Rome, after whom he named a number, in such a manner as to surprise the stirring leaders of the capital.

But perhaps his greatest work was the rebuilding of the temple in his later years. It is said that he repented of some of his very wicked deeds against the Jews and went to one of the aged rabbis whose eyes he had put out years before and

asked him what he could do to make amends for his wrong. The rabbi replied, "As thou hast put out the light of the world by killing so many teachers of the law, now work for the light of the world by restoring the temple in all its splendor." If this story be true, then the temple had back of it not only a desire to please the nation whom Herod ruled, but also a desire to make right some of the awful crimes of which he was guilty.

These were good qualities in Herod, and it would be well did the reader not need to look at the other side of his life. The good in the man, however, was almost entirely shut out from view by his awful crimes. He was selfish as few men are. Being ruler and having life and property almost wholly at his command, his selfish and jealous nature knew no bounds. No crime was too bad, providing it helped him to carry out his plans. And when he grew older and his plans did not always work as he expected, he grew more and more cruel and his thirst for blood was something terrible. It kept

him not from destroying the lives of innocent ones in his own home. He put to death his most beautiful wife Mariamne in one of his fits of cruelty and never recovered from the feelings of remorse that followed. At another time when his two sons by her, just coming into manhood, showed some ability and bade fair to please the people he ruled, he could not stand this but had them quietly put to death.

Just five days before his own death he sent his son Antipas to the headsman to be executed. And when this cruel tyrant saw his end was near, feeling that all Judea would be glad when he was gone, instead of weeping over him, he caused a number of the leading men of the Jews to be put in prison and left orders that they all be executed as soon as he passed away. This he did so that there would be mourning in the land at the time he died. But a dead man has not power, and this order was not carried out.

## II.

### AN ANGEL VISIT.

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THROUGHOUT all Judea the deepest despair brooded in the minds and hearts of the Jews. In nearly all the murders of which he was guilty, Herod sought to wipe out every possible leader in Israel that might some day endanger his throne. Some of his victims were looked upon by the Jews as their hope for a better time; some of them were in line to become the high priest. So it is but natural that when the last of these legal claimants to the highest office of the Jewish church perished, the nation as one man sank in a sullen gloom.

During these darkened times but one glimmer of light came to the more thoughtful. It was this: The coming of the long-looked-for Messiah, it was commonly believed, was to be preceded by times of trouble and conflict. And many a one reasoned that if this were true,

surely the time was drawing nigh when the Lord would come.

This feeling of the near approach of the advent of Christ prompted some priests to live as godly lives as they knew how. They read the Scriptures with great zeal, sought after God in upright living, and in all their worship were as fervent as their pious hearts could be. Thus it was even in these days, when few were faithful and sin ran loose and rampant in the Holy Land, that God still found those through whom He could work out His purposes.

Amidst a godless priesthood there was one Zacharias. He was of the tribe of Levi, on which Moses imposed the office of priesthood. His name means "the Lord remembers," and how truly its full meaning may be seen in his own life. His wife's name was Elizabeth. She was of the family of Aaron, Moses' brother, and the one who acted as priest and spokesman for him in all the journey from Egypt through the wilderness. Thus both husband and wife were of

priestly rank, the most noble of the Jews. It is no surprise, then, knowing their parentage, that these two people "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." God's heroes are always born of good parents, of those who themselves have schooled their minds and hearts in the purest possible love and service and have striven to impart the same to their children.

Not as worship is to-day, confined to a few stated hours during the week and on Sunday, the service of the temple was daily and occupied a good portion of each day. When David provided for the building of the first temple, knowing the amount of service it would require to take care of the place and conduct all the services, and wishing not to make this burden heavy upon any set of priests, he divided those who belonged to the priesthood into twenty-four classes or courses. Each course took its turn, coming to the temple and serving for one week. In this way a priest spent one

week in every twenty-four in Jerusalem, and the balance of the time at his home in the village somewhere within the bounds of Palestine. During the times when the people were carried off captive, as it came to pass between the time when David started this service and the time of Zacharias, there were not enough priests to carry out this plan of service. Nevertheless as soon as Israel could arrange they always returned to this method of serving in the temple. In the time of Zacharias there were twenty-four courses.

The service of the temple, too, during the week was not left for chance or to be provided for on the spur of the moment. Each day was so portioned out that each priest knew what he was to do and when to do it. The assigning of these duties was done by lot. This was especially true in the choosing of one for each day to burn the incense during the morning and evening sacrifices; for these services were looked upon as the most important ones of the whole day.

It may have been the Sabbath. The lot had fallen upon Zacharias to perform the part of going in before the Lord in the holy of holies. It was the hour when in the court of Israel there was a great gathering of men, and the part set off for the women was filled to overflowing with worshipers. In front of these and in plain view was the bleeding lamb, just slain and laid upon the altar. In the holy place, did any one dare to enter save the chosen priest, would have been seen the table of showbread, the golden candlestick with its seven lamps, and the altar of incense in the centre.

The priests belonging to the same course as Zacharias attended to the sacrifice on the altar of burnt offerings, while at the proper time he himself came forth to prepare to enter the holy of holies. He appeared before the congregation clad in white priestly robes, his head covered and his feet bare. He took some fire from off the altar of sacrifice, and went within the holy place to lay it upon the altar of incense. This altar had

a golden cup called a censer. In this he laid some coals and upon them was placed some fragrant gum made just for this particular use.\* Soon the room was filled with a fragrance as forth from the censer came wreaths of smoke, giving assurance that not only the prayers of those who were gathered in that great temple were heard by the Lord, but also all the prayers of the faithful Jews over the land wherever they may have been at that hour.†

To a priest like Zacharias it was a supreme moment of his life. Perhaps it was his first time to go into such a presence. He realized he stood between Jehovah and the people just beyond the curtain, for whom he was about to pray. Deep emotion filled his breast as he thought of the privilege; a sense of awe came over him as he realized before Whom he now was; and yet a certain delight filled his soul as he went on with

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\*God forbade any one to make the same preparation used in this service for his own use. See Exodus 30: 34-38.

†Psalms 141: 2; Rev. 5: 8; 7: 3, 4.

the service, and his whole being was aglow with rapture as he most fervently pleaded that Jehovah, through the sacrifice and offerings, might forgive the sins of the people waiting on the outside. What precious moments! They were all too fleeting as he stood in the place once filled with Jehovah's awful Presence.

His duties before the Lord were done. With a deep sense of the holiness of the place and his own unworthiness to be there, Zacharias was just about to withdraw when the stillness of the room was broken by the rustling of angelic wings. For, behold! there appeared on the right side of the altar one clothed in white. Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, was there. The power of God as of old had appeared unto a devout priest once again. The fact, too, that the heavenly messenger stood on the right side of the altar was a good sign for Zacharias.\*

Centuries had passed since an angel had visited any of the chosen peo-

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\*Mark 16: 5; Acts 7: 55.

ple of God. It is true that Zacharias, with others, had been looking and longing and praying for some sign of the coming of the Lord, but now when the angel appeared, the faithful priest was startled and afraid, and stood trembling in the presence of the holy one. But no time was given him for thought; for at once Gabriel broke the silence with his own angelic voice as he said, "Fear not, Zacharias."

What words these are! All through the ages the cry has been, "Fear and obey." Man sought to obey, lest he die. The thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, when Israel was in the wilderness and received the law from God through Moses, had always more or less struck terror into the hearts of the people. But a new day was dawning. Its dayspring was upon them. A new gospel—one of love that casteth out all fear—was about to be proclaimed. Instead of standing far away from God as Israel had to stay away from the mountain on which God spoke, a time was now at hand when the

worshiper could draw nigh, yea, even "be hid with Christ in God." No longer would the world have to listen now and then to the startling messenger of heaven and then wait and wonder and long until his return again: but now it could hear the loving voice of Him who spake so pleadingly and tenderly, "Come unto Me, all ye who labor and are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

### III.

## STRICKEN DUMB.

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GABRIEL did not give Zacharias much time to think over what the precious words, "Fear not," really meant. They simply quieted his fears and prepared him to receive the gracious message that followed:

"Fear not, Zacharias; for thy prayer is heard;

And thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son,

And thou shalt call his name John.

And thou shalt have joy and gladness;

And many shall rejoice at his birth.

For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord,

And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink;

And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb,

And many of the children of Israel shall be turned to the Lord their God.

And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias,

To turn the hearts of the parents to the children,

And the disobedient to the wisdom of the  
just;  
To make ready a people prepared for the  
Lord.”\*

What a rich treasure this message, so simple and yet so nobly stated, must have been to Zacharias. He had studied the Old Testament writings and knew the story of Abraham and Sarah having a son in their old age. “That strange event of their lives, is it possible that it shall be repeated in my own?” thought he. He had long since learned what a blessing it was to Abraham, but so unlooked for was the news that Zacharias was not ready to receive it for himself.

In spite of the surprise, the words of the angel stirred the priest’s very soul. They touched the one great sorrow of his life. While he and Elizabeth had been happy in every other way, the fact that they had no son to comfort their old age and continue their name and memory down through time, was at first a

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\*Luke 1: 13-17.

great burden for them to bear. They had been taught by their religion that children, and especially sons, were the greatest blessing which could be given them from a loving God, and that the absence of them was the greatest sorrow that could come to them. Rachel's prayer way back in the early history of the nation, "Give me children, or else I die,"\* best expressed the desire of every childless woman. Not to have a child was looked upon as a reproach, in fact almost a calamity.

So important was the advent of a son into a home that in many countries of the East even to-day the custom exists of naming the parents through the name of the son, so that in this instance the people would no longer speak of Zacharias and Elizabeth when wishing to refer to them, but say "the father and mother of John."

Not to have a child was a great trial of faith which Zacharias and Elizabeth endured patiently before the Lord. They

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\*Gen. 30: 1.

were righteous and bowed meekly, knowing the Lord doeth all things well. If it was a disgrace to be childless,\* they never doubted God's love for them and did not murmur at their lot. They were resigned to it all, happy in each other's love, and calmly waited the pleasure of God's will, being assured that His wisdom would work out His purposes best.

The time was past when they could hope to have a child of their own. So from praying for one, they had turned to pray that they might live to see Him who was to redeem Israel,—or, as Zacharias often said in his prayers, “the consolation of Israel.” Thus did they beseech the Lord in their daily worship at home; but more than this, this same thought became the burden of the priestly husband's prayer while before the altar of God in the temple. Leaning strongly upon the promises of God to His now despised people, his soul went out in agony, crying for the coming of the Messiah. As David cried, “Oh that the salvation of

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\*Gen. 20: 18; Hos. 9: 14; Jer. 29: 32; 35: 19.

Israel were come out of Zion,"\* so had he sought the Lord often and in tears.

When it is recalled how greatly the priests lacked true vital piety at that time, and how formal and insincere was the worship of most of those who gathered in the temple, or raised their voices in worship any place in the Holy Land, it is a surprise to find such faith as is shown here in Zacharias. God did not forget such a servant nor disregard all this love and devotion. From the lips of the angel came the double promise which in due time brought forth the deepest thankfulness. Just think of it! Not only were Zacharias and his dear wife to see the long-looked-for Messiah, but they themselves were to have a son in their old age. Could it be possible! Might there not be some mistake? And yet they had all their days sought the kingdom of God and his righteousness FIRST, and to them was simply to be given all earthly needs, yea, even a son to bless their home.

The child's name was to be "John,"

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\*Psalm 14: 7.

which means God-given, or *God is gracious*. It is hinted that he would not be honored among men, or hold high station in the world. Instead he was to go before and prepare the way for the meek and lowly Savior. While thus he was to walk in the humbler paths of life in this world, he was to be great in the sight of God.

This child, furthermore, it was told, was not to drink wine or any kind of strong drink, and from his birth was to be filled with the Holy Ghost. This was told to show that he was set apart beforehand for a holy purpose in the world. So great was to be his power over the hearts of men, turning them from sin to repentance, that people would think that the fiery and wonderful prophet Elijah, about whom every Jew loved to talk, had come back to life again.

The message was too sudden. Zacharias, a man of holy life and great faith, had still not reached the point where he at once believed even the messenger from heaven. The news was too good to be

true, his now stirred-up mind thought: How can it be true! For a moment it seems the faithful aged priest forgot the history of his own nation and the wonderful things God had done for it. In this moment of weakness he asked the angel for a sign or proof to show that all that was told him would come to pass.

How strange is man! Here is this pious priest who had borne the burden of sorrow in his home all these years and never doubted God, or uttered a murmur against his childless lot. But now for an instant faith looses hold and the news, that otherwise would have created supreme joy, was doubted. Yet this is often repeated in the life of every boy and girl. Things for which they have longed have come to them at a time not expected, and they were overcome and did not realize the sweetness of the favor granted. Perhaps, too, as these same young people grow older they may come to places in life where they pray for things needed and, when given, fail at first in faith to receive them joyfully.

The penalty that came upon Zacharias for doubting was strange and no doubt somewhat hard to bear. For prompt and with striking effect did the words greet his ears, "I am Gabriel who standeth in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings."

At once the priest recalled that this same heavenly one came to Daniel and spoke to him,\* and that now he (the priest) was standing before this same one, who when in heaven was close to Jehovah Himself.

But the angel spoke further, saying, "And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season."

No further words of doubt can be expressed; no further chance to hear the sweet accents of Gabriel. Though it was a silence for a time only, yet it clearly showed Zacharias that indeed Jehovah

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\*Dan 8: 16; 9: 21.

was there in all power and that He was displeased with His servant's unbelief. How near to a more severe judgment was the priest! Surely as in the long months of silence he thought over the whole event in the holy of holies, he must have felt deeply how justly Jehovah might have cut him off from the land and from among the living and appointed his portion with those in despair. Then he saw God's great love in saving him, unworthy though he was of it all. He also felt sure now that the time when the hope of Israel should appear, was drawing nigh.

## IV.

### HEBRON.

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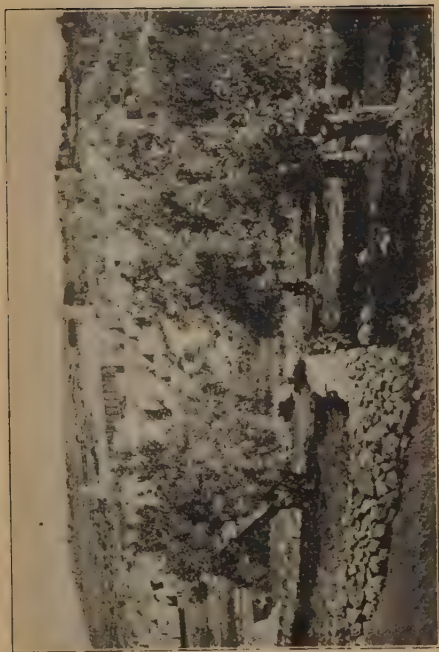
BUT how about the people in the temple who were present when Zacharias went into the holy of holies? It was the custom that no one would withdraw from the place of worship until the priest who had gone in to the altar of incense came out again. Then after he, with uplifted hands, breathed a blessing upon them, would they depart in peace.

Why did Zacharias stay so long? Fear and wonder began to possess their souls, lest he went in there not in the proper manner and met the awful judgment of God. They recalled how, when David brought up the ark to Jerusalem, two priests who put out their hands to keep it from falling, were stricken down dead. Could it be that this priest whom they had known so long and had learned to revere for his piety had been judged of God and died within the sacred enclosure?

Just as anxiety was reaching a pretty high point Zacharias came forth. It was no surprise that he showed signs of some unusual experience. Before he had time to tell the people, many felt sure he had seen an angel; and when he, deaf and dumb, made signs to dismiss them the thought was confirmed in their minds. The people left the temple without delay, greatly wondering.

Zacharias could not well tell the wondrous message, neither was he disposed to commit it to unholy hands. Hastening from the temple he sought his home in the city and there told the good news to Elizabeth. He attended the services of the temple the rest of the week and then the two betook themselves to the hill country of Judea south of Jerusalem.

What joy—joy that could not be expressed in words—filled their hearts as they journeyed along! God was indeed gracious to them and his loving-kindness great beyond measure. What thoughts of love, what pious purposes welled forth from their hearts. How ardent must



Hebron.



have been Elizabeth's desire to bring up the promised child in such a way as would work the greatest good for the God whom they had so earnestly worshiped.

The hill country of Judea was a quiet country retreat and very helpful to the two aged ones in carrying out God's purposes best. Untouched by the din and stir of the world, it gave a peculiar nearness to Jehovah that could not have been better.

The exact home of Zacharias is somewhat in dispute, but it is very generally thought that Hebron was the place. This was a town eighteen miles south from Jerusalem, nestled among the hills at the southern end of a range that reaches far north through the land of Palestine. It is one of the oldest cities of history, for it was built "seven years before Zoan in Egypt,"\* and is spoken of in the Bible even before ancient Damascus.† It belonged to the Amorites in

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\*Num. 13: 22.

†Compare Gen. 13: 18; 15: 2.

Abraham's time. Here Sarah died and Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite for a family tomb,\* and laid her to rest. Later Abraham, as well as his son Isaac, and in turn Isaac's son Jacob were laid to rest beside her.

When Israel came out of Egypt and settled in Palestine, Hebron became one of the cities of refuge, and also one of the places where priests and Levites might reside.† Here David when he first was made king of Judah had his royal home. Here, too, most of his sons were born. Later at this same place the elders of the twelve tribes of Israel gathered and crowned David as their king.‡ Sad to say, but nevertheless true, at this place Absalom, the unfaithful son of king David, set up his power and began to overthrow his father's kingdom.§

History this side of Christ tells how at last Hebron fell into the hands of the

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\*Gen. 23: 2-20.

†Josh. 20: 7; 21: 11, 12.

‡2 Sam. 2: 1; 4: 11; 1 Kings 2: 11; 2 Sam. 5: 1-3.

§2 Sam. 15: 9, 10.

Moslems and is held by them to this day. At this place, travelers of the fourteenth century relate that a kind of hospital was kept up. Every day something like twelve hundred loaves of bread, besides other things, were given out to any one who came, without concern as to color, race, or religion.

The Hebron of to-day is located in the end of a valley supposed to be the valley of Eshcol. Here the spies from Israel while yet in the wilderness found the large clusters of grapes.\* At its widest the valley is about four miles. In summertime it is beautiful to look upon. Thrifty olive trees, groups of almond trees and the choicest of vineyards are to be seen in whatever direction one may look. Each year the fields yield a large harvest, and the cattle, sheep, goats, and donkeys find the best of pasture on the more rugged hillsides.

Hebron is built up in three parts,—a main village where the great mosque and the bazars (stores) are, and the two

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\*Num. 13: 23.

smaller portions not very far away. There are no walls around the town as are generally found about the cities of the East. The streets are narrow. The houses built of stone have the same flat roof found everywhere in the Holy Land.

A favorite camping ground for tourists in Palestine is a place above and over against the main part of the town, at the top of a gently sloping strip of ground. Just north of this point in an olive orchard is a fountain of cool, refreshing water gushing forth in a good-sized stream from underneath an arch.

Down in the valley, nearer the town, are the ancient pools built of stone and filled with water from the rains. Here men, women, children, donkeys and dogs come to secure their needed supply of water.

About a mile north of town is Abraham's Oak. Here every traveler visits, and many stop to rest. The oak is in the midst of an olive orchard. That the tree is very ancient cannot be questioned; for the actual distance around the trunk is

twenty-three feet. And while that shows a great age, yet it can hardly be thought to be so old that it is the actual tree under which Abraham pitched his tent when he dwelt in the valley near by.\*

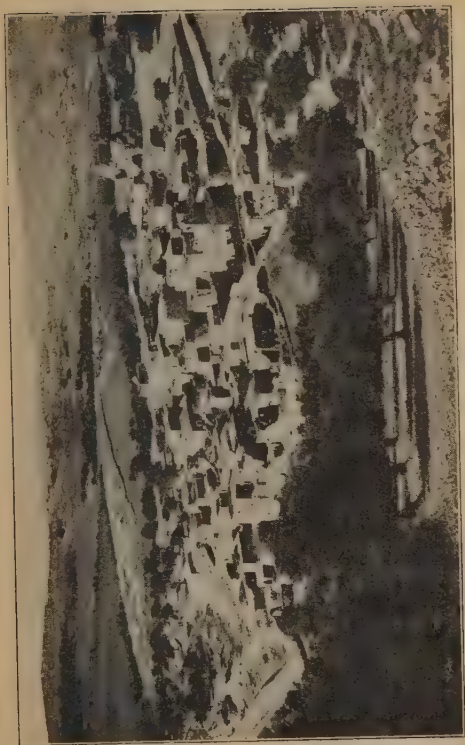
Travelers say, however, that as they stand under this oak and look down over the valley before them, and think of what all has happened in the past in and about this place, a peculiar spell comes over them. The past walks before them in rapid view, and the heroes of God from Abraham to John the Baptist pass before in the mind's eye. The place gathers about it an interest and charm not equaled by many places in the land of the Bible.

Hebron is peopled to-day by about five thousand fierce Moslems who will not allow any Christian to dwell anywhere near the town. The place of greatest interest in the village is the mosque built over the cave of Machpelah. This mosque is built on the slope of the eastern hill of the main part of the town. Its

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\*Gen. 18.

walls are made of very large stone, hewn out very much like those found in the walls of Jerusalem. No windows are in the outer wall and this is built so high that no eye from without can see what is within the enclosure. The inside is considered by the Moslems as holy ground and no Christian enters, save by royal permit or in disguise.



NAZARETH



## V.

### PRAISES! PRAISES!

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SIX months from the time Gabriel appeared to Zacharias he was sent to earth again with a more important message. This time he went to the Virgin Mary who lived at Nazareth and told her that she would become the mother of the long-looked-for Messiah. Mary received the words of the angel in beautiful submission, though they were a great trial to her faith. She had prayed earnestly that the Redeemer should come, and the fact of this great desire in her life, perhaps as much as anything, fitted her to be the honored mother of the Lord.

But the way she was told, and the manner of the coming of the Christ into the world by her, was such that she did not at first feel at liberty to reveal her secret to anyone. How strange, too, must have been her experience, as day after day with her soul filled with joy and gladness

she dared not tell its mainspring to those about her.

The truth of it rested upon her mind, however, as the days passed away, with such weight that she felt she must confide her secret to some one. Then it was she recalled that the angel told her that Elizabeth, her cousin, though old in years, was soon to be the mother of a child. Since this, too, was much out of the ordinary in life, and this child of her cousin was to be the forerunner of the work her own expected One was to do, she at once decided to make a visit to Elizabeth. For she thought, "With safety may I confide the wonderful experience I have had, the message that was given me, and the hope of Israel that through divine favor rests within me."

The distance to Hebron was at least a hundred miles, a long journey for one so young to make all alone. But with freedom that seems to have been accorded women in her social standing she prepared to go even without an escort or guard. What cared she for any dangers

through the wild parts of the land! Had not the Jehovah of Israel singled her out as His chosen handmaid, and was He not able to care for her? Then, too, with such a wonderful message perhaps she never thought of the dangers that might beset her on the way.

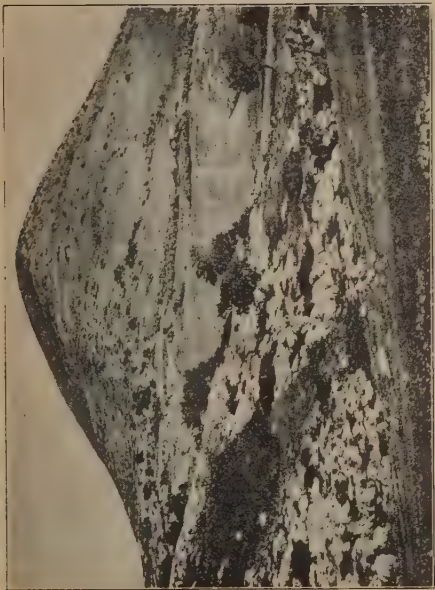
The road from Nazareth to Jerusalem was familiar, for often she had gone over it in traveling to the annual gatherings at the latter place. To her left she beheld Mount Tabor, a peak that guided the traveler in his journey. In the little stream of Kishon she bathed her weary feet while the song of Deborah came to her mind and she sang it over again. Eastward as she proceeded, Mount Gilboa came into view and she thought of king Saul and the sad death he met there in battle. It may be that at Samaria she stayed all night with some friends; but if she did she never hinted of her precious secret.

Resuming her journey the next day she came in turn to Shechem, Jacob's

well, and Joseph's tomb, all places with a history which she well knew and was deeply interested in. Perhaps the next night she remained at Bethel and thought of Jacob and his ladder that reached clear up into heaven and having thereon angels ascending and descending. How like her own experience in some ways was the vision of Jacob. Then came Shiloh, the place of old where Hannah's hymn of joy, and the calling of her own son Samuel at midnight to become prophet and priest, were memories all of which lingered in her mind.

Jerusalem was reached at last. Its gilded dome gave her a thrill of joy as she thought of the coming new kingdom whose splendor would far excel the beauty of the symbol of the one she now beheld. The night spent in the Holy City was filled with holier thoughts of God and His great favor to her.

Bright and early she left the city of Zion, for one more day's journey would bring her to the home of her kinswoman, Elizabeth. This day held its own joys,



To Her Left She Beheld Mount Tabor.



the first of which was the hour spent in resting and thinking as she stopped for a time beside the tomb of Rachel. A little further on she came to the shepherd plains carpeted over with tender grass. Little did she think as her sandals that day pressed the velvet green, that in a few short months the soft air above would ring with the rich melody of heaven as the angel choir would sing their glad song of good will to men, and the echoes thereof would die away in every land and in every tongue.

Bethlehem lay in her pathway, but she pressed on, never thinking for one moment that here would be the scene of her greatest joy and triumph—joy to her mother heart and triumph for the world of mankind.

Another short stretch in her journey and the cheerful shade of Abraham's Oak greeted her, and here for a short time she rested her weary feet. At last Mary arrived at the home of Elizabeth. She entered in true eastern style. With the intent of saluting her kinswoman as be-

comes the wife of an honored priest, Mary started to speak in the common words of greeting used on such an occasion. But lo! to her great surprise, before she had a chance to complete her greeting, Elizabeth herself, seeing Mary, exclaimed in the very words that the angel Gabriel used the time he came to the latter when he said, "Blessed art thou among women. . . And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? . . . And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be done those things which were told her from the Lord."\*

Mary saw at once that she had no need of telling her secret, for already Elizabeth knew it. This gave her a new strength for her faith, for how else could she have known unless the Lord Himself revealed it unto her?

What a noble woman was Elizabeth! Rising above the petty lines that often separate one of position and rank from one who is not, she greeted without the

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\*Luke 1: 42, 43, 45.

least feeling of jealousy the relative and woman of low estate and honored her for the high office to which she was called.

While all this is true on Elizabeth's part, Mary, filled with the thoughts of her journey and the Spirit of God that dwelt within her, burst forth in a song of praise which carried with it a sweetness and strength that proved her to be a true daughter and descendant of Israel's greatest poet and singer, David. It clearly shows that she knew well the songs of the worthy people of her nation and that they were the musings of her days and the comfort of her life, for in reply to the greeting which Elizabeth gave, Mary broke forth in the following beautiful lines:

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my  
Savior.  
For He hath looked upon the low caste of  
His handmaiden:  
For, behold, from henceforth all genera-  
tions shall call me blessed.  
For He that is mighty hath done to me  
great things;  
And holy is His name.

And His mercy is unto generations and generations

Of them that fear Him.

He hath showed strength with His arm;

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart.

He hath put down princes from their thrones,

And hath exalted them of low degree.

The hungry He hath filled with good things;

And the rich He hath sent empty away.

He hath helped Israel His servant.

That He might remember mercy

(As He spake unto our fathers)

Toward Abraham and his seed forever."

What a song! Listen to its clear, sweet tone as it almost foretells the Lord's own tender words that are the life of the Gospel He proclaimed: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled."

## VI.

### DUMB LIPS SPEAK AGAIN.

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FOR about three months did these godly women dwell together, doubtless doing the work of their simple eastern home and talking over those truths and events which during these days were most precious to them. Part of the time was spent in reading the Scripture. As they dwelt upon its precious words, their minds would enlarge upon the goodness of Jehovah for choosing them as the ones through whom the past promises of Israel as well as her future hopes were to be fulfilled.

The time for Mary to return home came. With an abiding trust in the Lord these women of faith parted, both joyful in what was to be done for the world through them.

Shortly after Mary's leaving, the son promised to Elizabeth and Zacharias was born. What a moment in the world!

Heaven was deeply interested in this child. Men who knew anything about his mission, rejoiced. But none were filled with delight as was the aged priest and faithful wife. Who can describe the thoughts and feelings of Zacharias as with tears of joy he looked into the little face of his firstborn—of him who was there in accord with God's promise. What a thrill of gladness must have filled the parents' hearts as they heard its first childish cry, a cry for which the world for a long time had been waiting.

Perhaps for once Zacharias was glad that he was dumb. For there are times in life, when its experiences are so deep and so full of meaning that words are but a poor, weak means of seeking to express one's inner feelings. Such times, too, come to every one who leans in greatest faith on the arm of God, and who in due season sees that faith has not been misplaced, but is richly rewarded.

The news that a little son had come to the home of Zacharias spread rapidly over the village. According to eastern

ways the relatives and friends of the family at once gathered in to rejoice with them. To be sure, these people did not know the real import of the life that was in their midst. Yet that at this late time in life this worthy family should be so highly honored they looked upon as a special favor from Jehovah. Their joy, also, was the greater because they knew of no one so worthy of such an honor.

Since the best scholars cannot agree on the date when John was born, it is useless to name one. In fact as far as exact dates are concerned in the life of John the Baptist the reader must be satisfied with but few of them.

On the eighth day, according to the Jewish law,\* the child was to be named. This gave occasion for a large number of relatives and friends to gather at the home. The gathering, too, was larger than usual because it had been known that the father had been dumb ever since the vision, and this had caused no little comment and interest.

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\*Gen. 21: 3, 4.

It would appear that on such occasions the friends, instead of the parents, at least sometimes, had the privilege of saying what the child's name should be. Following this custom they were about to bestow upon the babe the honored name of the father, when the mother, hearing it, spoke up and said, "Not so; but he shall be called John."

This caused no small amount of stir and words. True to the eastern ways and manners, there was the usual loud and excited talking and disputing. They said to Elizabeth that such a name would not be proper, for no member of the family ever bore it. In spite of all their protests, however, Elizabeth remained unmoved in what she said. No doubt she was thus fixed because from the father she had learned that Gabriel, the angel, had said his name should be John.

At last the confusion stopped long enough for some of them to think of the father and appeal to him. This they did by signs, for he was still not able to talk.





His Name is John.



He asked for a writing tablet,\* and wrote thereon, "His name is John." Notice, not his name shall be John from now on, but, "He is named, has been for some time, and his name is John."

There are reasons, perhaps, for not following the family line in the name, and it might be well to note them briefly. This child had come to usher in a new kingdom, one of grace and God's great love. It was but proper that a new name, not one of the family of priests to which he belonged, but one pointing to this new kingdom for which he would labor, should be given him. This child was to be a preacher of a new order of things. He was to take the place of the priest, and the wilderness where he would preach was to succeed the temple and its services.

If the reader can measure but in a small way what all this departure even

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\*This was made of a smooth, flat piece of wood, covered over with a surface of wax. The writing was done by using a round piece of metal, pointed at one end to scratch the wax, and flat and smooth at the other so as to erase the letters by smoothing out the scratches.

in the naming of the child meant to these devout Jews, so strongly attached to the traditions, customs and laws of the nation, he will not himself marvel at Luke's record where he says, "They all marveled." There is not the least wonder, either, that these people said in their hearts, "What then shall this child be?" Neither is it a surprise that they laid all these things up in their hearts with the intent to watch closely the results.

With the naming of the child as Zacharias confirmed it, his lips, according to the promise of the angel, were loosened again. At once they spoke forth in fullness of praise. Why not? The silence was to him an assurance that the promise of a son would be fulfilled; now that it was realized the sign was of no more use. While in the son was the father's deepest joy, it must have been an experience calling forth much gladness to have his power of speech back again.

While the friends were there, yet on the day of the naming, this ability to speak came back to Zacharias. Seeing

this change with the other strange events about the child's birth, the people were struck with amazement that soon passed into great fear. As they left the home and met others each one stopped to tell of the wonderful things that had happened. Soon it was "noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea," the story of God's wondrous dealings with the honored priest Zacharias and his devoted wife.

But not only the story was told. The fact that the days had come again when angels would visit Israel was talked about and stirred every pious heart and quickened a new hope in every sincere breast. A silent uplift of joy went heavenward wherever the news spread, and all watched the child to see what manner of man he should become. .

As for Zacharias a most beautiful song of joy came from his lips, and it is fitting to give it in full. What lofty words of praise and what cheering prophecy were spoken by this pious father as he said,

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;  
For He hath visited and wrought redemption for His people,  
And hath raised up a horn of salvation for us  
In the house of His servant David.  
(As He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets which have been since the world began),  
Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;  
To shew mercy towards our fathers,  
And to remember His holy covenant;  
The oath which He sware unto Abraham our father,  
To grant unto us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies  
Should serve Him without fear.  
In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.  
Yea and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High;  
For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to make ready His ways;  
To give knowledge of salvation unto His people  
In the remission of their sins,  
Because of the tender mercy of our God,  
Whereby the dayspring from on high shall visit us,  
To shine upon them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death;  
To guide our feet into the ways of peace.”\*

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\*Luke 1: 68-79.

## VII.

### BOYHOOD AND TRAINING.

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OUTSIDE of the last verse in the first chapter of Luke there is nothing on record concerning the boyhood of John the Baptist. However, this does not keep back some facts that easily were a part of his early life.

As a babe he was just like other Jewish children. He grew into boyhood and then into youth strong in muscle and beautiful in form, the natural outgrowth of life under the severe rules which he was compelled to obey. His food was simple, and of the very best for a good physical body. His exercise was such as to make him strong and healthy in every particular. His mother took a just pride in seeing every possible element of perfection in body attained in him.

But his parents were no less concerned about his mind and heart. As soon as he could say the words he was taught parts

of the Scriptures, until he could repeat them himself. His childhood days were filled with delight as he listened to the stories of heroism which his fathers before him made by their brave lives. As soon as he was old enough he went to the school held in their near-by synagogue. His advance was striking compared to that of the average child. His teachers thought him unusual. It was but a few years until he was in the higher schools of the scribes.

Though the language of the Greeks was spoken in some parts of Palestine, and especially in Jerusalem, it is not probable that John sought to learn it. He was taught that such a language was not for the son of a priest, that to acquire it would bring him on a level with the feeder of swine; for the doctors of the law said that "he who feeds swine is no worse than he who teaches his son the wisdom of the Greeks."

On the other hand, the most slavish study of the law and its thousands of "jots and tittles" which no one could

remember was to be the delight of his life, and he was to accept every one of these teachings without question, if he was to attain to any degree of note in his nation. The language of Palestine, which no doubt John spoke, is known as a Syriac dialect mixed with Hebrew.\*

Did he often meet Jesus and know him? Nothing would be more natural. Their mothers were related; they were on such intimate terms that Mary spent three months in Elizabeth's home. The great annual feast at Jerusalem would bring the families together at least once each year, and there the boys, with purposes similiar though not well defined in some ways, sought the same interesting features of that sacred week. Then, too, it is reasonable to suppose that both were told of the unusual events connected with their births and that the one was the promised Messiah. And it may not be going too far to say that John looked adoringly upon his cousin Jesus

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\*Matt. 27: 46; Mark 3: 17; 5: 41; 7: 34; 15: 36; Acts 21: 37, 40; 22: 2; 26: 14.

and longed for the time when through some outward sign it should be shown him beyond a doubt that He was the Son of God.

From a social standpoint John had every advantage. His parents were leaders in their home country. Their home was visited by those who were most learned and refined. These visitors in turn looked up to John's parents and held him in high esteem. Little do children realize how much comes to them through the good name and character of their parents.

When it came to ancestors, no one could show a better record. John could trace his relationship back through fourteen hundred years, even to the days when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. In that line were to be found the most famous of Israel's great men.

This honored position and good ancestry of necessity made the family strict observers of the law. Yet as priests Zacharias and his wife were only too

glad to adhere closely to all its demands. But the burden fell upon John too. For surely his parents would not be strict with themselves and bring their child up differently. Just as fast as he could learn them, he was taught to obey the hundred and one and more rules concerning the eating of meats, when and what to drink, how to dress, what furniture to have in the home, what dishes to use, all about selling, buying, cooking, washing of pots, cups, tables, and even the cleansing of himself, so that in all these things he might walk blamelessly each day. Not like children to-day who want so much liberty and ease, John lived, ate, labored, studied, slept, and awoke all by rule, and the slightest departure from these rules, if continued, would be regarded as a sin fatal to his honor and power as a priest among the Jews.

It was but natural, too, as soon as he was old enough, since his father went every six months to serve a week in the temple, that John should go along. At

such times he would be carefully told all the meaning of each service during the week. When he reached his teens no doubt he was often found in the circle of those who listened to the learned doctors talk about the fine points of the law.

What a lasting impression must the beautiful, snowy-marble and gold-covered temple, with its altars and white-robed priests, the singing of the Levites, the fine playing of the horns and flutes and cymbals, and the countless throng of worshipers from every land, have made upon his youthful mind as he beheld them time after time. It might be thought that this formal worship would have had a strong influence to direct his mind in the wrong way. This might have proved true had it not been for the deep spiritual life which he received at his home, along with the special help of the Holy Spirit upon him. As it was, these visits to the temple helped him to see and know the emptiness of the worship of the Jews and gave him the facts

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of their lives against which he so strongly preached later in life.

While he thus, without knowing it, was gathering fuel for the fires of his later life, his mind naturally took to the study of Old Testament worthies, and especially those prophets who spoke of the coming of Christ. This is seen not only in the fact that his life, like Elijah's and Elisha's, was filled with but one thought,—his mission as forerunner,—but also by his fiery talks to the people, his never-tiring zeal, and his intense hatred of all hypocrisy. In his childhood he became acquainted with the heartless worship of priest and people, and later spoke in severest terms to them about their sinful lives.

As he grew into young manhood his thought was serious and deep. If he paid any attention to the murders and wars going on around him during his years of getting ready for work, he thought of them only as signs of the coming of that kingdom which should "increase" while the one in which he was

now living must "decrease." Filled with the Spirit he followed the highest and noblest of life's greatest truths, and in this way from the very beginning prepared himself for his great work in life. He sought to "walk with God" as Enoch had walked; he wanted to be a "friend of God" as Abraham his father had been; he longed from childhood to be called of God as was little Samuel. He learned early in life that a call to duty was not to be disregarded, that he was to cast aside from the very beginning all thought of selfish ease and pleasure. He looked upon the world and its honors as of little worth, but the purpose for which he was sent into the world as the greatest possible moment. Is it any wonder that he became the one who was to "prepare the way of the Lord"?

As he lingered now and then at the cave of Machpelah near his home, where Abraham was buried, the faith of that great father inspired his own soul to a still greater faith in God. David, Israel's greatest king, centuries before traveled

over the hill country where John was a boy. His trials, trust in God and earnest life spurred the lad to acquit himself in a noble way. No wonder, then, that John the Baptist was the great preacher he was! No wonder, then, that so many came out from all over Judea to be baptized of him! No wonder that Herod himself trembled as the fearless man denounced his wicked life in the capital! No wonder that he was marked even from his childhood as "strong in the spirit." From his childhood he trained for manhood, and in manhood he reaped the rich harvest of a useful life, the beginning of which reached back to his childhood.

Would God that each young man and woman who reads these lines could realize this same truth. To-day childhood must have ease, pleasure, be allowed to indulge in more or less sin, and this often under the direction of misguided parents. Later in life, when the mould is formed, when the habits are fixed, when character is firm, they seek to change.

Then comes a struggle in which in most cases the good is not victor. But further. Youth is the time to prepare for manhood. Childhood is the bedrock on which true goodness is built to greatest perfection in any life. Believe this now and be diligent in making use of your youth. To you will then be verified the words spoken of John, "He was greatest of the prophets; yet you in the kingdom will be greater than he."

## VIII.

### TO BE A NAZARITE.

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AMONG the Israelites, even before Moses' time, when one made a solemn promise to God to do a certain thing it was called a vow and carried with it certain rules that other people did not have to observe. Either men or women took these vows. Usually the vow was taken when the person was in great distress or peril. If a child was very sick, the mother might make a vow to God that if the child got well she would give it to serve the Lord for a certain time. Then the child would be under the vow. If it recovered to health it would have to live out the vow.

Often persons made vows affecting themselves alone. Then the vow was to bring them closer to their idea of service to God. In its right spirit the end sought is a good one. As a rule among the Jews the vow did develop a higher degree of spirit life.

The persons who took vows may be put into two classes,—those who were under the vow from infancy all through life, such as Samuel, Samson and John the Baptist; others who took the vow for a short time only. Moses gave laws regulating the life and conduct of the Nazarite,\* and ever after these were very closely lived up to.

It was no small matter to live up to the vow as John the Baptist had to do. The traditions and laws of the Jews were burdensome because it was so hard to keep from breaking them. But the vow required its subject to abstain from many things that a good Jew might otherwise partake of. Gabriel told John's father that the child should "drink neither wine nor strong drink."† This kept him all his life from tasting any kind of wine or drink that would have a tendency to make one drunken. He was not allowed to use vinegar in any form or the grape as fruit or in the shape of

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\*Numbers 6.

†Luke 1: 15,

raisins. In fact he was forbidden to eat anything that was made from the vine tree, from "the kernel to the husk."

In addition to this rule about eating, all the days of the vow no razor was to touch the subject's head. His hair and beard grew as long as it would without being hindered the least bit. To trim it with either knife, scissors or razor was to mar what God had put there and would greatly displease Him. The Nazarite was not allowed to go near a dead body, even if it was the body of his father, mother, brother or sister, lest in doing so he make himself "unclean" before the Lord. If he should happen to come suddenly upon a dead body it would take seven days of the strictest service to make himself clean again.

There is no doubt good reason for all these strict rules of living. He who took a vow did so because he wanted to be nearer to God in service. Not to touch wine or the grape in any form, not only guarded against the evils of intemperance in all its forms, but also assured the

one of having a clear head and heart during all his services before God. As for the hair, it has always been a symbol of vigor and strength, as well as a crown left to honor God. To leave this crown untouched was the highest mark of honor which the wearer could show his heavenly Father. Because of the holiness of the life thus lived one who was a Nazarite all his life was equal to a priest and was permitted to enter the inner temple.

Simon the Just, who lived about three hundred years before Christ, tells\* of a Nazarite who came to him to have his hair cut off. "Once," says he, "a man of the South came to me who had made the Nazarite vow. I looked at him. He had glorious eyes, a noble face, and his hair fell over his shoulders in great, waving masses. 'Why do you wish to cut off this magnificent hair and be a Nazarite no longer?' I asked him. 'I am a shepherd to my father', said he, 'in the town where I live. One day in drawing water from the spring, I saw my likeness

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\*Found in Geikie's "Life of Christ."

below, and felt a secret pride. An evil thought began to lay hold on me and destroy me. Then I said, "Wicked creature! You would fain be proud of what is not yours, and ought to be no more to you than dust and worthlessness; I vow to my God that I will cut off my hair for his glory." " " " "Forthwith," continued Simon, "I embraced him and said, 'Would that we had many Nazarites like thee in Israel.' "

One should discern the difference between the life of a Nazarite and the monks that have hid themselves away in the cloisters and monasteries of the world. The monks vow to live holy lives, it is true, and cut themselves off from every worldly association in their efforts. They deny themselves many good things. All this is good as far as it goes, but a study of John the Baptist, Samuel and Samson clearly shows that while self-denial of things that otherwise might be eaten, is good, it is not in harmony with God's plan. The Nazarite should not separate himself from being with others

and mingling freely with men in life. This defeats the very purpose for which God would have each one become holy—to lead others to a similar life—and cultivates a very selfish life.

No man was more holy than Christ, and yet He mingled with men all His days. It may be good to live a holy life when separated from all that vexes in the world, but it is far better to be holy while living amidst these evil influences. Paul very clearly sets forth the rule for every Christian to live by. He should seek to be holy even as the Lord Himself is holy. “Wherefore if meat maketh my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh forevermore, that I make not my brother to stumble.”\*

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\*1 Cor. 8: 13.

## IX.

### IN THE WILDERNESS.

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JUST when John left his home and friends to begin the lonely life which for a long time he lead in the wilderness, cannot be settled. At least not later than early manhood he thus went aside.

The power that led John into the wilderness may be clearly seen in his life all along the way. In the first place he had a knowledge of the great mission he was to fill in the world. That meant much to him. At times he had great conflicts with himself to give up to such a service when the world with its pleasures and chances arrayed itself on the one side, against the life of denial and service to be endured, foreseen, on the other. But he longed for the coming of the day of the Lord and this spurred him not only to carry out his purpose of life, and controlled all his acts, but it caused him to withdraw for a season from mingling

with others, in order that he might conquer self entirely and come out stronger for God. His life at Nazareth for the time was sadly out of joint with the worldly notions of the people about him. And that he might know himself better and how to proceed in his great work, he knew no better thing to do than to go to the wilderness alone and there fight the battles of life and learn to know God's will fully.

In the wilderness John's soul found not only rest from the world, but the quiet of the place slowly calmed his troubled breast into a peace that gave him power to study himself aright. There he thought upon God and His Word, and sought to make his will wholly subject to the will of the Lord. In this frame of mind he was given to much prayer. So near was Jehovah to him that He was more a Friend than a God.

Such going away from all that on earth is near and dear is good for every one in life. It helps to make one nearer to a loving Father and fills him with His

Spirit. But the extreme of staying away always from men should be guarded against. Such a course is not manly. He is best who steps into the conflict of life with his fellows and comes out victor. Then, too, God wants the leaven of every good life to work itself into the world until all men have come under its blessed influence.

Such a life in the wilderness gave John the opportunity of taking a stand nearer to God than the people, absorbed with the things of the world, had yet sought. This was necessary. If he was to call people to repent it was demanded of him first of all to point by his own life to a better one. If he intended to urge people to conquer sin and error in themselves, he himself must first come out as victor over these same evils. It is no wonder, then, that he went into the wilderness to battle against sin.

He came forth from the wilderness showing many marks from the struggle, and also that he was victor over self and sin to a very great extent.

Herein lies the secret of young people admiring older ones. Their youthful minds are unable to grasp the meets and bounds of victory which older ones have made, and so the latter pose as heroes in the eyes of the former. Their words are sage, their counsel is sweet, their lives are powerful. The same is true in a measure with young people. If a young person wishes to have power in the world, and wield a good influence over his companions, he must first conquer the sins common to his age and station, and then his life will be felt among others. It is by this same road of living and doing that every man and woman is given power to do good in the world. Just in the measure that one conquers evil and labors for good may he succeed.

Perhaps several years were spent in the quiet places of wild Judea. During this time John's food was of the simplest kind. He, no doubt, had all needed comforts. In such a climate, where it is warm the whole year round, the caves would afford him a very good dwelling.



He Came Forth from the Wilderness.



For clothing he used the plainest and most common material,—camel's hair cloth. This was the same as was used by the poorest people of the country about him. This cloth was made from the hair off the hump of the camel. Twice a year the hump was shorn. Sometimes the cloth was a plain black, and at other times it was striped white and black and was always coarse and rough. The people used the same cloth to make tents. When used to make clothing it was woven into a kind of cloak which hung loosely about the body, save when it was drawn up close by a leathern girdle. Something in the shape of a hood protected the head when it was necessary. The feet were shielded from the rough paths of the wilderness by sandals made from camel's hide and fastened on by straps.

As for food, it was "locusts and wild honey." The locust (grasshopper) was first dried and then prepared for eating. According to the law of Moses\* the lo-

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\*Lev. 9: 22.

cust was clean and good for food. Travelers\* tell that at certain times of the year the locusts came in such numbers as to darken the heavens in their flight. People then went forth and collected vast quantities of them, even to horse loads. They are cast into boiling salt water alive. After a time they are taken out and the head, feet and wings are removed. The body is then thoroughly dried in the sun and then put away for future use. Sometimes the dried locusts are boiled in butter and spread on the hard, unleavened bread which the common people eat. But the more common way is to grind the dried locust into a powder and mix flour and water with it. This is then made into cakes and eaten instead of bread, especially when flour is scarce.

As for honey, during the springtime the land of Palestine, even into the wilderness, was carpeted over with wild flowers of every kind. These afforded

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\*Such as Dr. Thomson in "The Land and the Book," and Dr. Van Lennep in "Bible Lands."

plenty of nectar for the little wild bees which made their homes in the cracks and crevices of the rocky hillsides. To-day much honey is gathered from these places and sold for food.

Thus John not only had good food, which was healthy for his body, but one is reminded of what Moses promised the people concerning the same land. "It flows," said he, "with milk and honey;" also of what Samuel later in history means when he speaks of hungry men of Israel who "came to a wood; and there was honey upon the ground. And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped."\*

The water which he drank burst forth from the springs which abound in that part of the country,—pure, fresh and wholesome.

In living such a simple life,—plain clothing, plain food, and plain drink,—John meant to express that he felt unworthy of the smallest blessing of God. He would content himself by fasting,

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\*1 Sam. 14: 25, 26.

thereby doing without the better things of life which were within his easy reach, and living on these simpler things. He took his stand, too, not for himself alone, but for all the people who seemed so careless about such matters. He thus was showing them not only by words but by deeds what they themselves ought to do and be.

There is no greater fact in every great man's life than that it has had its wilderness,—that period in life when left alone and sometimes feeling lonely he has struggled on and on, waiting for the time when he might step forth in power and might. The quiet of a godly home, with seemingly very little chance to do good, or the rather secluded life of a good school may all be wilderness experiences to-day for the young person, which, if piously passed through, will prove to be of much help later in life,—will make the person grow and wax strong in spirit until the day that he shall come forth to lead Israel unto God.

## X.

### AS A PREACHER.

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WHEN John withdrew to the wilderness his people were in the hands of strong enemies. Their cry arose to heaven for release. There were some who wanted no king but God to rule over them, and no law to guide them but His. These looked and longed for the Messiah.

But for the most part the people were full of grievous sins, and this fact lay upon John's heart like a great burden. At times it made him feel as if the shadow of death had come over him.\* He could easily see that God had forsaken His people, because they first forsook Him. How they had profaned the temple! Where once the presence of God was felt, now was a den of thieves.† Its teachers had fallen far below the mark of being proper guides; for, blind themselves to the true and good, it could not

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\*Luke 1: 17.

†Mark 11: 17.

be otherwise than that they would lead those who followed them, and all go into the ditch.\* Even the high priest, God's holy vicar on earth, was, through his own wicked life, a hissing and by-word among both Jews and Romans.

The people had made themselves into classes, each one despising the other just as much as they could. There was the Pharisee, one of a class who looked upon themselves as at the top of the ladder of right living, while the publican was clear at the bottom and not worthy of notice. On the other hand, the publican hated the Pharisee with a bitterness that was alarming. The holy priest and the righteous Levite,—or such they should have been,—could not help the “poor dog” of a traveler even when he fell among thieves; but rather than make themselves unholy according to their notions they would let the unfortunate one lie bleeding and dying.

John had not reached twenty before he saw nine different men put in the high

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\*Matt. 15: 14.

priest's office in Jerusalem. That office, so holy, was used by these wicked men to promote their own evil desires. Is it any wonder that Jesus spoke of the people as being "an evil and adulterous generation," much worse than Sodom and Gomorrah and Nineveh, which, because of their great wickedness, were destroyed?\*

With a memory filled with such sad thoughts of the Jews, John at the close of his years of quiet and holy thought looked down upon the nation as from a high watchtower. He was not so far above the evils as not to know how they had taken hold of the people, and yet above them far enough that they had not stained his own life. His was a true heart and beat in deepest sympathy for the condition of his people.

With all this in mind, too, John had studied the Scriptures and thought and prayed much about what might be done for his people. Clearer and stronger grew the thought in his heart that there was no way of escape save through the

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\*Matt. 10: 15; 11: 24; 12: 39, 41; Mark 13: 38.

promised Messiah. Let His kingdom come and He be at the head of it, and the way would open.

This is why he began thinking about telling the people to repent of their sins and quit their evil living. In fact, so thoroughly did this idea of reform fasten itself upon him that he believed that if the people would turn about to the right not only would the Messiah come, but the Romans who oppressed them so would be cast off.

As he day by day mused upon these things the fire within him burned, and he sought for some way of breaking forth with the message which was within him. As the engine at the depot, fired up for the task of drawing its burden of human life, stands puffing and groaning to start out on its journey, so had John stood in the wilderness gathering force within until, steamed up to the highest point, the Holy Ghost came to him with the word, "Go thou," and the voice of one crying in the wilderness was heard. John had started on his great mission.

No doubt the nearness of the Messiah's coming had been told to him.\* The voice of God within caused him to leap forth with joy, and he at once left his hiding and began to seek men in order to tell them to repent, for a terrible Judge was at hand who would condemn those who were not sorry for sin, but that He, too, would be full of mercy to all those who sought Him with a contrite heart.

John was not told by the Jews that he should preach. He had his orders from God direct while he waited in the wilderness. He was glad, too, when they came, for he drew his girdle close about him as if preparing for a race, and threw his whole life into the work before him.

What an event of his life! The great clock of God's work among men began to strike the hour when the Messiah would come. Eager to prepare the people for His coming, John feared no one and talked to please none but God. The truth burned within him and out of its fullness he declared it. He was not afraid. No

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\*John 1: 33; Luke 1: 17.

hollow-mouthed priest or smooth-tongued scribe, or servant of the king's court dressed in "soft clothing" was he. His eye was afire with the flame of his message and his cheeks were aglow with its power. Men needed not to wait to hear him talk before they felt the guilt of sin. To look upon the preacher was enough to awaken and strike terror to a sleepy conscience.

John's preaching was not to please the people. He hated a proud look, a selfish life, and high living, and was not slow in telling each one of his sins. In his eyes the poorest heathen had a soul worth just as much before God as the best priest that served in the temple. With a message based on such vital truths men soon found out that the gospel told by this wonderful preacher of the wilderness was as free and as pure as the winds that swept gently over the hills about them.

It was no concern of his that some of the would-be pious men at Jerusalem sneered at him and what he preached be-

cause he had not received permission from the Sanhedrin\* to preach and teach. But "when Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, . . . the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; as it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."†

It was at a time when Caiaphas and Annas divided the work of the high priest between them and disgraced the office with so many of their vile deeds. Outside of this the wicked Herod

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\*A body of seventy elders who were the power among the Jews.

†Luke 3:1-6.

reigned. It was a sad day for the Jews, indeed. Public shame, private sin and woe, and a complete trampling under foot of all that was holy in the spirit of religion was seen throughout the land. Discontent was found everywhere. All this, with the fact of John's strange history and still stranger power in his message, caused every one to turn aside and listen to him.

Coming from the wilderness had a peculiar effect upon the people. The old teachers of the Jews used to say that "from the wilderness came the law, the tabernacle, the Sanhedrin, the priesthood, and the office of the Levites. Even the kingship, and, indeed, every good gift which God granted Israel, came from the desert."\* As John came forth and asked men to believe on God by repenting and turning from their sins, the people were reminded of the words of the prophet, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our

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\*Quoted by Sepp, "Leben Jesu."

God.”\* They were then not taken wholly by surprise when many thought that Elijah, of whom the prophet Malachi spoke, was again on earth. Yet in spite of this feeling of expectation, John came with such a flash of force and with such great suddenness that many could not believe on him as from God when he cried out, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

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\*Isa. 40: 3.

## XI.

### THE JORDAN.

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JOHN spoke much like one of the ancient prophets. His manner was such that he quickly won the hearts of the common people. His words expressed what his hearers could not tell of the sorrows of life. Hence as he told of the better time at hand he at once stirred up a great interest in the coming of the new kingdom.

He did no miracles, and yet his very manner as well as words caused every one to stop and listen and think as though a miracle had been done. Not on any words of his own or any way of telling his story did he depend; entirely upon divine power did he lean as he gave his message to the people. He was not disappointed. Crowds came to hear him; they received his words gladly. As if with but one thought all the people of the southern part of Palestine went out,

listened, believed on and followed this new leader of the wilderness. From the quiet of the lonely hermit life now came the very top notch of highest favor among the rank and file of Judea. Yet John was well trained. He did not lose his head in this moment of popularity. So deeply was he interested in his message that the more the people praised him, the harder he hit at the sins so plainly seen in life about him, and the closer he held to the truth he was called to declare.

As John stood on some knoll or rock to bring himself a little above his hearers, and his form was outlined in clear-cut lines against the lower skies, one could not help but note that an uncommon man was there. His form was spare and strong through the habits of life he had from his childhood; his Jewish eyes were bright and brimful of the soul that looked out through them in tenderness on some and with the fire of wrath upon others; his long, glossy black hair hanging about his shoulders had

been uncut for thirty years; his coarse robe, brought close to him by its leathern girdle, told not of a life of comfort, but severity. All these features of the man made the looker-on who knew the Scriptures think of the marked traits of character and habits of life of the fiery Elijah of earlier days.

It was not, then, unnatural that the people should think John to be Elijah. Malachi, the last of the prophets, had declared, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord."\* For four hundred years the people had hoped to see this prophecy fulfilled. Perhaps the most of them expected Elijah to come in the form of some wise Pharisee who would lead the nation to its golden age; or in the form of some mighty warrior who would march the Jews to a great victory over their enemies and restore the throne of David in all its glory. It is true there were few,

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\*Mal. 4: 5.

if any, that ever caught the real meaning of the promise of the Messiah; and yet they could not help but feel while listening to the words of the Preacher, as they poured upon them with power, that the spirit that prompted him was much like the one that stirred Elijah.

So strong was this thought of Elijah coming again into the world among the Jews that the disciples, Peter, James and John, when on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus, spoke no words of surprise to see him among the number. In fact, the account would almost show that they were surprised that he did not remain and take part in this earthly kingdom which they still thought would be set up on earth. It was then that Jesus replied and told them that "Elijah is come already, and they knew him not." Once before the Lord referred to John the Baptist when he said, "This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. . . .

And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah which was for to come."\*

It is no wonder then that when,—somewhere along the lower end of the Jordan near the cities of the plain of Jericho,—John began his work of preaching, many people came to hear him. Jericho itself was a city of "palms and roses," for it had just lately been built by Herod the Great. Among other costly buildings his own palace was there. The city had been set apart as a proper place where priests should reside. It is said that in the time of Christ some twelve hundred of these leaders of the people lived there and took their turns in going up to Jerusalem to serve in the temple.

A broad road from Jericho led its way over the plain and amidst the hills and mountains up to Jerusalem. It was well built, but passed through some very wild country and was made dangerous by thieves. Along this road it was not uncommon for a man to fall among these

\*Matt. 11: 10, 14.

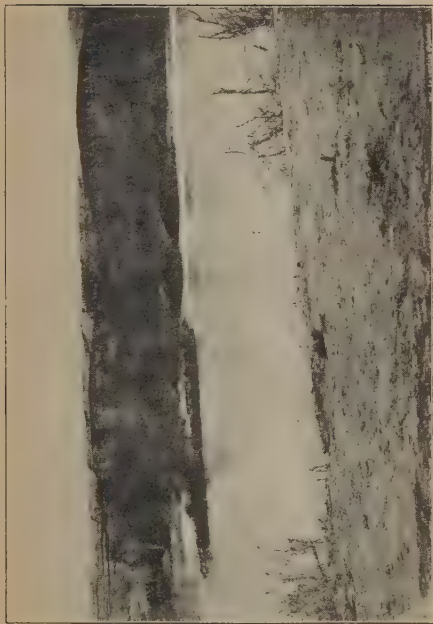
bad men as Christ relates in his teaching about the good Samaritan.

Opposite Jericho and across the Jordan was the rich and fertile plain of Moab. Near the city was one of the best crossings or fordings which the lower Jordan had. It was thus that many large caravans passed back and forth on their long journeys of trade between the countries east and west. All classes of people passed over this route. At certain times of the year this great highway, and especially at the ford of the river, was crowded with people eager to press on in their journey. Men with goods and wares, camels laden with their burdens, horsemen and footmen, pious Jews on the way to the temple, and Moabites, Arabians or other Gentiles on their way to some western market,—all mingled together as they climbed the steady incline towards Jerusalem.

The valley along the Jordan was beautiful in the time of John the Baptist. The river bed proper had cut a deep gulch into the loose soil. On either bank

was seen the bench where the ground rose higher and marked the limit of the overflow during those times of the year when the stream spread out over the valley. At Jericho the river proper is about one hundred feet wide and from three to seven feet deep. This made it possible to ford either for man or beast save in the spring and fall when the rains were heavy.

On the upper or second bank was a fine growth of oak and sycamore, willow, oleander and other trees, while down on the banks next to the water's edge was a rank, thick growth of low shrubs and tall, waving reeds. The western plain of the valley stretched away from Jericho towards the mountains of Judea, making at one time one of the most fertile and beautiful places in all Palestine. Especially is this true of the time of John. So rich was the soil and so pleasing to the eye was this plain that it was called "the divine land." The pretty green of the vegetation and the wild and dreamy touch which the palm groves gave the



The Valley Along the Jordan was Beautiful.



landscape was something wonderful. Then, too, the fairy-like gardens, which Herod himself maintained at great expense by having water brought upon these fields through ditches, made the traveler feel as if he was passing through Eden.

What better place could John have selected to begin his work? While in a sense he was out in the wilderness preaching, yet he had taken up his work near one of the greatest thoroughfares of the Holy Land. A grand valley indeed, filled with marks of God's favor to man; a stream with a history dear to both Jew and Christian,—this is the place where John began to proclaim the coming of another kingdom.

## XII.

### REPENT! REPENT!

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JOHN was indeed a great man. In him was found combined the spirit of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest men of the Old Testament. He stood nearest to Christ. He was the end of the law of God as well as the fulfillment of all the promises made concerning Christ. For these reasons Jesus said of him that among those born of women John was the greatest; yet because he belonged to the Old Testament times, with its lesser favors and blessings, his place was not as great in the eyes of the Master as the place of any one in the kingdom of heaven. This places a very high estimate on the privilege of being in Christ.

It is interesting to read the simple though sublime account which the apostle John gives of John the Baptist: "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. The same came

for witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light. There was the true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world."\*

The apostle looked upon John as being a witness of Jesus the Light. All through the Old Testament the prophets witnessed the coming of the Lord, but none save John was permitted to see His coming while in the flesh.

This was a precious privilege too. It gave this man of the wilderness a fullness and a direct manner of speaking that was to him a power. It helped much to reach the varied classes that came to hear him preach.

While he was speaking to the people, it would be interesting if it were known what thoughts came to him as he saw among those whom he was addressing, some of earlier years—old associates and friends. Looking closer as he tried to

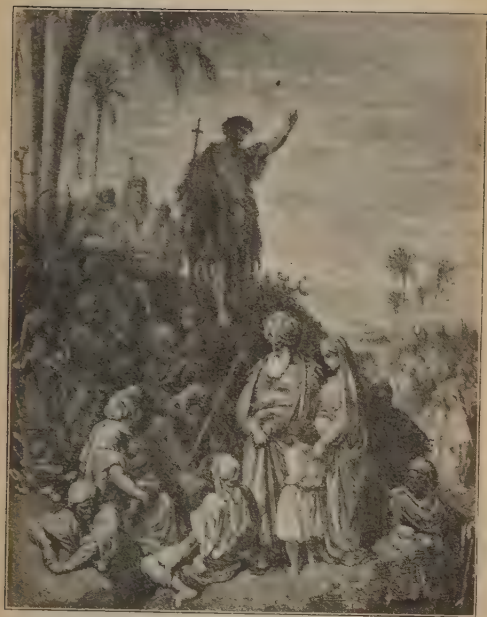
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\*John 1: 6-9.

reach their hearts by appeals to each one singly and alone, he saw among his listeners the aged whom in days before he revered. Then there were many who were learned and others high in position. The rich came to hear John and the poor stayed not away.

But all this made no difference to the Preacher. What cared he whether they were rich or poor, learned or untaught?—they all needed to change their lives. In stern tones he proclaimed unto all alike, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The change, too, which he urged was not alone outward. If he caught his ideas from the Old Testament doctrine of being single of purpose and life and separate from the world, he pressed home the truth that one must be changed at heart. The old life must die from within out, and a new and better one must take its place from within out too.

Such teaching was very humbling to the Jews. For a preacher, having the power he showed, to tell all of them that



"Repent ye, for the Kingdom of heaven is  
at hand."



they were sinners when they had been living up so close to all the teachings of the law; that they were ignorant when they could repeat whole portions of the Scriptures as well as many of the traditions of the elders; that they were living in darkness of life and spirit when they believed they were the favored of God living in the brightest and best light the world had thus far seen, was a very startling word and prompted many of them to look to themselves to see if it was really true.

There was hope for those, though, who had felt they were not what God would have them be and were much in despair over their condition. He reached out a helping hand to all who cried out from the depths of their sin and flashed across their blinded eyes a light which opened them and made them see not only their sins, but a forgiveness that was something new in their lives. Taking this view of his preaching, it is in full accord with what the prophet Isaiah said when talking about the high places being

made low and the low filled up and all being made ready to receive the King.

Since a good reason for doing anything always appeals to people, John urged his plea to repent by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Centuries had slowly passed since any one thus talked about the coming of the kingdom. Some had almost despaired of its coming. Now to have one rise and speak with so much certainty that the kingdom was at hand, was indeed a matter of unusual interest.

John was not unlike the prophets before him in many ways. He preached against evil and pointed out men's sins as Israel had not heard it done for a long time. He declared in plain terms that God was displeased with their wicked lives and with a nation like the Jews so deep in wrongdoing. Yet as he bore down upon their sins he sought also to lift up their hearts and lives by urging every one to turn to what was true and holy. His delight was not so much in burning the chaff as in trying to save

every grain of wheat.\* “Repent and turn to the Lord” was what he proclaimed, and this was many times more precious than anything scribe, Pharisee or priest had told them.

Neither did he want people to come into the kingdom with the thought that they would not be tried and put to the test to live the changed **life** he taught. He who would not submit to the most severe test was unfit to be a child of the King in this new kingdom. Each one was to be tried as with fire. Position, learning, wealth, these good in their places gave the possessor no advantage over those in opposite stations in life. All who would come into the kingdom had to come by way of the narrow door of repentance. No one could bring with him any good of his own to make his way easier. He further taught that full right in the kingdom was only to those who forgot self in their service to the King.

It is reasonable to think that when

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\*Luke 3: 9, 17.

John told of awful judgments to come he again expressed what many sincere Jews had already felt in their hearts. What else could follow such wickedness? Every thoughtful Jew was anxious about the future for himself as well as concerned about the fate of his nation.

What hours of experience must those open-air meetings have been! As the Eastern man feels a freedom to cry out whenever he desires to do so, no matter who is near, how strangely must the scene of the broken-hearted, the singuilty, the praying one have appeared as each one cried out in the hour of peril, "What must I do?"\* How intently must others have listened to catch every word, looking into their own souls now hanging between life and death, until with tears running down the cheeks they implored God for mercy. In great numbers, the strong and the weak, the learned and the untaught, the rich and the poor, the moral and the sinful,—all

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\*Luke 3: 10.

submitted to the authority of John and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. The interest became intense. News of the work of grace reached Jerusalem in such a way as to bring the people of the Holy City out into the wilderness as one man smitten with guilt, and there they humbly confessed their sins and secured pardon also.

One sometimes stops to think what kind of a message John would have given had he asked the chief priests and elders what he should say and how he should say it. Like many persons to-day, older and with a larger experience, they would have said to him, "You must respect their cultured feelings. You must not make their sin so black. You must not wound their feelings. Do not disturb their customs. And above all have regard for those who have wealth or are in power." Surely John would have received counsel to preach a soft gospel, one not speaking of sin and judgment, lest the people be offended.

No such influence ever touched the

Baptist. Or if it did he threw it off as deadly and wholly out of place in God's plan for his work. He knew the hearts of his hearers and saw how vile some were, and how sin-stained all were and how much they all needed cleansing. He heard the lowly ones groan and sigh and noted their struggles for a purer and better life. He cut deep and quick into their hearts, for he wanted to rid them of their foul disease. The case was urgent. He met it nobly and bravely. Many, many felt his kind words that followed as precious ointment to their souls. The people came to hear him preach with their souls enwrapped in a darkness and fearful looking forward to the wrath of an angry God; but they went away with the sunlight of hope and the freedom from sin resting upon them. For the preacher no sooner cried, "Repent, repent," than he followed it up with "the kingdom is at hand,—enter." In thus throwing open wide the doors into that gracious realm multitudes could not do otherwise than enter. "Poor in spirit" they were,

bowed down with guilt and grief over sin, yet confessing all they came forth with the assurance of great riches in grace, "for theirs was the kingdom of heaven."

### XIII.

#### PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES.

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THE wilderness where John did his preaching had a very emphatic influence upon his words as they went to the hearts of his hearers. It was God's temple, and the surroundings were most inviting and uplifting. The pure air, the plain broken by the mountain peaks, the graceful palms here and there, the fruitful vineyards and the rippling streams all helped to bring the people closer to God than they were used to be even in their worship in the temple on Mount Zion.

They forgot their proud feeling of goodness and confessed their sins. They realized all of a sudden that before this time their religion was one of form and not of spirit. That bold, clear voice of the Preacher reached from the plains of the Jordan to every part of Palestine. Priests and scribes quit their discussion

of fine points of the law and came to listen and then tremble at the word they heard.

Many of those who gathered were not in the habit of meeting or seeing each other, for they came together from all sorts of places and from all stations in life. There was the Bedouin of the desert at home in camp life coming face to face with the well-bred and cultured people of the city. Perhaps some of the town people were surprised at themselves to know they were out in the wilds of the country mingling with "common folks" of all classes and sleeping under the stars of heaven without any one to protect them from thieves and robbers. As every one knows, the Jews, and especially those of Jerusalem, were not very kind and courteous to any Gentile people. How strange, then, it must have been to see them sitting around the campfire and talking during the evening hour with the people from Edom whom they used to hate most thoroughly. And think of the thrice-hated soldiers who

were there also. What a camp! A mixture of all kinds of people held together with one great man who was their leader only in telling them they were sinners and undone before their Maker.

John seems to have made four classes out of his hearers. There were first the people to whom he said, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat let him do likewise." Thus did he teach them to forsake their selfish lives, and put an end to that legal and illegal system of robbing each other that was hurting them as a nation and keeping back the Messiah. To know that they had really repented, let those who had more than they could use give to those who had not enough, and then the Redeemer would be assured that their hearts were sincere.

Then he spoke to the publicans, those Jews who were much disliked by their own nation because they had accepted Roman offices and were collecting taxes. They robbed the people by making the taxes larger than the Romans required

and put in their own pockets the excess. Thus they had grown rich quickly, but at the expense of their good name and favor with their own people. These were told to return to each one what had been wrongfully taken from him. At least one of these publicans made good John's preachings, for Zaccheus several years later promised the Master that he would restore all his ill-gotten gain.

The soldiers were not missed. The message to the people and the publicans did not fit them, and so they had to hear words suited to their lives. Perhaps, too, they formed the larger part of the crowd, for the days of John were days when there was much unrest and these men of the power of the law were needed in every part of the country to keep order. To them John said they should be good soldiers, prompt in obeying orders, but to cease all kinds of violence which made their lives cruel and themselves ruffians and robbers instead of keepers of the peace. They were told to be

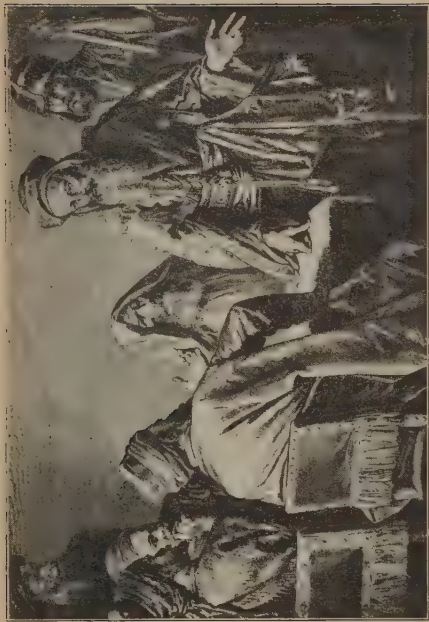
"content with their wages" and not to rob people as had been their habit.\*

But John held back his sharpest rebukes for the Pharisees and Sadducees. The former were the "high-toned" people of the Jews and felt they were the only ones who were right and in good standing with God. As such they would not allow any one who did not believe as they did to have freedom of speech, and hardly freedom of thought. They, perhaps, were the strongest party of the Jews, and thus had the power to enforce a great many points of law made by them that bound down souls to an enslaved religion.

The Sadducees were another class and not a whit better. They denied there was a hereafter. Yet in spite of this they were always pushing themselves forward to have the best places in the church. If they did not believe in a heaven, yet,

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\*The absence of asking the soldiers to leave their service, comes perhaps from the fact that under the Jewish law, war was sanctioned by God, in the light of the word thus far given to the people. Under the gospel of "peace and good will" the soldier life is not consistent.



We have Abraham for our Father.



expecting the kingdom to be restored here on earth, they allowed no one to keep them from having the best places in the coming kingdom.

Both Pharisees and Sadducees said, "We have Abraham for our father." Though they opposed each other in all points in Jewish life, they would always join hands when any one came along and taught that Gentiles should have as much favor in the new kingdom as did the Jews.

These proud and haughty men were drawn out into the wilderness to hear John. It is hard to tell what purpose brought them there. But it is clear that though John had spent years away from Jerusalem he had full knowledge of these men, their beliefs and doings. He knew that they corrupted the nation; that they led the people astray; that they formed public opinion, that they could condemn whomsoever they would, that he would be risking his life at their hands if any words he spoke would in the least offend them. But he did not

waver from his purpose or stop his message when they were in the crowd. At last, turning to this part of his hearers, in loud and clear tones with outstretched hand and finger pointing steadily at them as they stood in their flowing robes listening, John said, " Oh, ye generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bring, therefore, fruits meet for repentance : and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father : for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the ax is laid unto the root of the tree : therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire."\*

What could these proud-spirited men do? Against such plain words and keen looks they could not stand. They had no words in which to reply to his honest picture of their lives. They had been plainly told that he had his right to speak not from them, but from God. When

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\*Matt. 3: 7-10.

they turned to win the favor of the common people, they discovered he cared not. He was not trying to please any one but Jehovah, and his words fell the faster and the stronger upon them. Thus he talked to them, not with one word of praise for their lives, but plainly telling them that they were vile sinners and unless they too repented there was nothing but awful judgment awaiting them. They were plainly told that unless they came just as common sinners,—sinners, too, whom they abhorred,—there was no hope for them.

Then when John saw that they did not come in sincerity but rather to scoff and scorn at his word and work, he became vehement in his message. Vipers they were. Since the serpent was the emblem of the wicked, how hard must this have struck. He in the spirit of sarcasm asked them who had warned even them to flee the wrath to come. The climax of his preaching was reached when, rising above all fear of men, he declared in words at once startling and strong,

" You lead the people astray when you teach them that Israel alone can find favor with God; that the coming of the kingdom is strictly Jewish and that other nations shall have no part in it. Don't stop to reason within yourselves now and say you have Abraham for your father and that I am mistaken. I am not. For I say unto you that God is able of these stones at our feet, lying here in countless number, to raise up children unto Abraham who would be true and a credit to him, and you who claim to be his children and would keep others out of the kingdom will yourselves be excluded unless you repent."

The effect was marvelous. They trembled before his words. They were smitten and overcome by his power. They perhaps had come expecting to hear some timid preacher who like a reed was easily shaken by the wind; instead they found one unmoved as an oak, and themselves shaking in his presence. Their ears had been used to hearing words of flattery; from John came stinging words

of rebuke. They saw that he did not wear soft clothing and they realized he did not use soft words.

But they did not know the value of the hour. The kingdom of heaven was at hand and people were preparing and entering, but these proud sects accepted not the truth but rather rejected the message and were not baptized. The time went by and their hearts, shut to the gospel which they with the world had been waiting so long to hear, never opened again. A little later, when a band of them came to Jesus from Jerusalem to question the Master, he said, "Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honour-eth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men. . . . O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye discern the signs of the times?"\*

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\*Matt. 15: 7-9; 16: 3.

One need not fear that John was too hard on these scoffers. Jesus later called them "fools and blind," "blind guides," "blind Pharisees," and likened them unto whitened sepulchres full of dead men's bones, said they built fine tombs for the prophets who in times past were stoned to death, and yet they were willing to kill the Just and Holy One of God now among them.

## XIV.

### BAPTIZING.

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ON the eastern slope of the river Jordan, just opposite where Jericho stood in the days of John, was a wilderness in the form of a plain extending for some miles and gently rising until it reached the foot of the mountains of Moab. As now, so in John's time, there were no villages in all this country. For one to remain in this part any length of time he had to have a tent and camp out.

This part of the wilderness had associated with it some holy memories for the Preacher as well as the people who came to hear him. Here Elijah went up to heaven in a chariot of fire many, many years before. It is no wonder, then, that the people coming to this place and hearing the man of the wilderness talk as he did, should think that according to Malachi's prophecy Elijah had actually come back to earth.

But John was more than a prophet. He was as Gabriel declared the forerunner of the Messiah and was proclaiming the fact that the long-looked-for kingdom was coming to the world in a very short time.

John was perfectly contented in his mission. Assured that in God's own time the Christ would appear, he went on with his work of preaching awaiting the moment when all his labor would be confirmed by the advent of the Messiah.

Yet it seemed proper to him that there should be some outward token of the change of life he had been preaching, so that the people who accepted his message could assert their sincerity before the world. He had no thought of having the people follow him as a leader; neither did he show any special interest in telling them what they should do the balance of their lives. Each one who accepted the message and repented was to go back to his home and take up the work he had been doing. He was in

himself to work out the plan of seeking God and to abide the time of the new kingdom. He was to school his own heart by proper daily living, and thus prepare himself as he thought would be best for the new King. There was in the teaching of the wilderness no thought of a body of believers with rules to direct them. The message was simply to get ready by changing life to that which was good: for "the kingdom of heaven was at hand." •

But while each one was thus to strive, John felt it would be good to have some public sign of the changed life, some step taken that would point out those who declared they were in favor of and sought reform, from others who did not so decide. For this reason he asked all those who believed the word he preached to be baptized.

Just where John gathered his idea for baptism is a little hard to decide. A great many good Bible scholars think that John in some way received it from God direct and that he was called the

" Baptist " because he was the first to do baptizing.\*

The baptism was not only " unto repentance " (a change of life), but it also inspired buoyant hope in the believer. Just as soon as he came from the water his whole heart was filled with the thought and desire of living to see the Messiah and entering the new kingdom. He stood ready to go in at once and be a happy subject and a willing servant. As in the parable of the bridegroom coming, which Jesus himself taught, these persons whom John baptized were waiting for the Master's coming, their lamps trimmed and burning.

To John's hearers there could have been no doubt that in being baptized they were set apart as those who desired and expected when Jesus came to be ad-

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\*Such scriptures as John 1: 25 and Matt. 21: 24-27 are easiest explained if it is held that John began baptism. Of course the idea was not new from one standpoint. The Jews expected Christ to teach some form of baptism. This they gleaned from such scriptures as, " With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation " (Isa. 12: 3); " In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness " (Zech. 13: 1).

mitted into the kingdom. In it they confessed they were sinners, felt their sense of danger and expressed a strong desire to "flee the wrath to come." To avoid the judgment of God, John told them further that if they lived changed lives and continued therein until the Messiah did come, He would baptize them "with the Holy Ghost and with fire."\* It looks very much as if John felt his baptism was simply a pledge not to do wrong, rather than a promise to seek to do the right. In fact, he did simply teach the soldier not to do violence and the tax-collector not to collect unjust amounts. He said nothing about telling the good news of a reformed life to those who had not heard him preach. None of those who were baptized, were told to start out into the world and proclaim the joyful news. No such thought entered their minds. After their baptism they expected the Christ and sought to be ready for His coming.

The great success of John's work in

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\*Luke 3: 16.

drawing crowds and having numbers accept his teachings did not please the priests and elders at Jerusalem. After the Pharisees and Sadducees had been to hear him and had received such bitter words concerning themselves, they went back home much perplexed, more disturbed and with their minds fully made up that John should be gotten out of the way in some manner. John came in touch with this feeling and, believing his hour had not yet come when his labors should be cut off, he moved his place of meeting up the Jordan to a spot called Bethabara. At this point there was a good ford across the river, and people could as well come over to hear him. Then, too, all southern Palestine was awake to his message and would follow him anywhere he went. By this move he would come closer to the people about the sea of Galilee and prepare them too for the coming of the new kingdom. In this he was not disappointed; for from every town of the region mentioned there came those who mingled with the

eager throng that heard the great Preacher.\*

John perhaps had been preaching for about six months. News of his wonderful words had reached the most of the out-of-the-way places of Palestine. Even down to Nazareth his fame had gone, and from this place now came to John at Bethabara One who was of special interest. Jesus was now about thirty years old. Thus far his duties had been in his home and his father's carpenter shop. His own city had been his world wherein he moved and labored in a quiet way.

Hearing of the great work that John was doing in the wilderness, Jesus had accepted the news as a sign that the hour had come when he should himself enter upon the work that was assigned him in the world. A broader field was awaiting him. Heretofore he was known as Jesus the Carpenter, but from now on he was to be known as Jesus the Christ.

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\*John 1: 44; 21: 2.

Did the breaking off of home ties, the tender love of a devoted mother, and the joys of the parental roof draw on the heartstrings of the coming One in Israel as one day He bade farewell to start for the first time to the wilderness? Was it a day of sadness for Mary who kept the secret things of His life in her heart to say good-bye to her wonderfully-begotten Son, about whom so many strange things have been said to her? Did He ever drop a tear upon His mother's bosom as He left on that day, knowing that the struggle in the mount of temptation, the greater one in the garden a few years hence and the painful death on the cross all awaited Him in their turn? And yet, though all this be true, there must have been joy and gladness in their hearts that day; for it was one which both had long looked, waited and prayed for. Ah, yes, it was the day when, after thirty years, the faith and love of both was bearing precious fruit.

## XV.

### JESUS IS BAPTIZED.

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ONE day a goodly number of people left Nazareth and joined a caravan or company that was going across the country to where John was preaching. Jesus was in the party, and in due time found Himself at Bethabara. He made no stir about His coming, but quietly took His place in the crowd and listened to the preaching of His herald.

In this act of Jesus coming to John to listen to his words He showed full approval of the work John was doing and placed the highest value upon it. It might be added here that in no sense was Jesus' work to be independent of John's. There was perfect union in the purposes of the two lives, even though the two men were reared under different influences. Each had his own sphere and in that he labored, and neither sought to interfere in the least with the

part the other had to do. So it was that when Jesus came to John in the height of his power as a preacher, the former made no show of His high calling, but waited the time when the latter should point Him out as the Son of God. John, too, as soon as he saw that Jesus was taking up His work began to withdraw with that willingness and good will which showed his great, self-forgetting heart.

What a day that was when Jesus came to John! The end of looking forward to His coming was at hand. What John had been preaching had come to pass. He had for some six months been telling, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," and now for a certainty it was here.

What a Man, too, was He who came to the Baptist. The rich were there; the poor sought the preacher; the learned tried to entrap him in his words; the humble fed upon his message. But all these are forgotten. No one's name has been preserved to history save that of the modest, quiet, godly man of Nazareth whom few noticed and none knew.

Here in the midst of the multitude moved the Messiah who was just entering upon His world work. Might not the lesson come home to every one that Jesus is often near and is not known?

The preaching was over; the crowd had moved down to the banks of the Jordan. The place was where the stream did not dash along as in many places, but rather ran lazily in its course. The quiet of the afternoon, with the blue sky overhead, the green banks fragrant from many flowers and fringed by graceful reeds, the smooth surface of the water, all lent a sublime sense to the scene. Only as John took one after another into the water and baptized them was the glassy surface of the river broken by waves that moved on and on until, though faintly, they touched the other shore.

There had been an unusual number baptized that day. But at last "when all the people were baptized"\* Jesus offered Himself as one for whom the sa-

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\*Luke 3: 21.

cred rite was to be performed. It is true that John and Jesus were cousins. Yet it is probable that they had not met each other for a number of years. For besides living in opposite ends of the Holy Land, John had spent his manhood years in the wilderness. So they had little or no opportunity to meet each other. If both went up to Jerusalem to attend the feast, the stern and rigid living up to law and creed found in John, and the holy, quiet and less forced service which Christ rendered, would not bring them together. Or if perchance they did keep up knowledge of each other, it is sure that when Jesus came to the Preacher for baptism the latter did not know Him as the coming Messiah; for John plainly says, "I knew Him not."\*

But the full light was to dawn upon the Baptist; and when it did come the fact that Jesus was a kinsman was nothing in John's mind compared to the one that He was the Messiah. As the man

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\*John 1: 31-33.

born blind who received his sight during darkness, looking out at nighttime, sees the morning star and thinks he knows how wonderful is light, and then is wholly overcome when the flood of real day breaks upon him and he exclaims, "I did not know the light," so John had felt when he came to see the Christ as He was soon to be revealed.

John was expecting Jesus every day, and so was on the lookout for Him. When Jesus, with His face speaking mutely yet strongly of a genuine goodness that commanded respect without a word, and His brow the very life of purity and love and gentleness, came forward John could not help but feel he was in the presence of more than the common persons whom he had been leading into the water.

How strange and unusual that feeling was that came over the baptizer. His heart had never feared before the haughty and powerful, be they Jews or Romans; the arrows of his severe words never failed to dart quickly into the

hearts of his hearers. But here his eyes met a pair out of which shone the light of heaven; here he beheld a brow pure and white, telling of the highest aims of life, the greatest beauty of living, the gentlest and strongest love man ever knew, the deepest wisdom and rarest faithfulness to truth that the world was ever permitted to know.

The contrast was great. Instead of hard sinners, sinners whose faces told of sin in every line, here was the Lamb of God without spot or blemish and a face showing no mark of sin. More than half believing that this One was the King Himself and that he as forerunner was but a servant to Him, John at once declared he was not worthy of such a service. He sought to decline baptizing Jesus, saying in very fitting words, "I have need of being baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?"\*

As a mere form John could easily have gone ahead and performed the rite; but being a baptizer of sinners,—those who

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\*Matt. 3: 14.

needed to repent,—he could not see the fitness of baptizing the sinless One. This feeling and the words which John spoke called forth this reply, “Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.”\* These words carry a meaning something like this: “It is well John that you feel as you do and that I am your Lord. But this baptism has a special meaning for me. It does not mean that I have sins to be forgiven or have lived a life for which I must repent. I want to be baptized so that even I may fulfill all the parts of right living for sinful man for whom I shall live and die. One part of my mission in the world shall be to submit to many things of a lowly nature that seem not to become me as the Son of God; yet by this very way I shall succeed in redeeming man. And now you in your office as forerunner just set aside for the present your feeling of not being worthy to do this holy work upon me, and recognize my thought and desire of submission

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\*Matt. 3: 15.

even to the baptism that you have been giving to sinners, and baptize Me. Together then we shall go through the rite and meet every legal demand that can ever be made.”\*

To John the moment was burdened with deepest meaning far beyond his knowing its full meaning; and this lack of knowing filled his mind with excitement. Along with his feeling of unfitness for the work was his great desire to know. Often after it had all passed did John refer to Jesus as One whose shoes he was not worthy to unlatch. Thus he would explain the greatness of the One whom he served.

To Jesus it was a time of greatest calm. The baptism was nothing formal. In it He was binding Himself to the work of spotless purity for the world. By it He was giving Himself up wholly to the

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\*The relation of John and Jesus in baptism is nicely illustrated in the act of the President of the United States taking the "oath of office." This "oath" is administered by the Chief Justice, who at all other times is subject to the President, but just while the President is taking the oath the Chief Justice in a sense is superior to the President.

will of God. All this and more than one can describe was written on every part of the Son's face as John led Him down into the water and baptized Him.

As the rite was being performed the spirit of prophecy came upon both John and Jesus, and they saw\* the heavens open and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descend and rest upon the head of the One just baptized. If up to this time John had not caught the real meaning of all that was happening, he could no longer be mistaken as he heard the saying from heaven. "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

"Indeed," thought John, "this is no common man. Surely it must be God's Son, the Christ, the union of God with perfect man, for only such would call forth the word just heard."

It was a blessed and happy moment in the Preacher's life. Afterwards in telling about it he would say, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove descends, and I heard those gracious words."

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\*Matt. 3:16; John 1:32.

It was a wonderful experience, too, for John. For from a few moments before, when he thought he did not know Him, he was quickly carried over and resting and rejoicing in the precious knowledge that the real Messiah was there. From now on in his preaching he could declare that he had seen the Lamb of God.

The great work of Christ was begun. From now on it has a place in the world, small at first it is true, but ever growing. Its power and blessed influence is to go forth among men until the ends of time. For centuries the law and the prophets had been pointing to this time and had been training the world for it.

Blessed hour! Yet thrice blessed the life that now began. For the flower of the Gospel had at last blossomed upon the old stalk of the law of Old Testament times, and as petal after petal unfolded to the world, the nations thereof have been amazed and delighted with its beauty of heaven, and the whole earth is being filled with its divine fragrance.

## XVI

### DECREASING AND INCREASING.

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THOUGH in the wilderness, Jesus was victor over Satan and returned in "the power of the Spirit," and though He felt the time had come for Him to begin His work among men, yet He waited until His herald should point Him out. For this would complete John's work and at the same time begin His own. It was because of this that He came back to where John was preaching. He quietly moved back and forth in the crowd, no one giving Him special notice.

On the same day of His return a number of the elders from the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem also arrived. They were under orders to question John closely to know who he was. There is little doubt, too, that their purpose was to entrap him and at last bring his work to an end. But in coming they showed none of their real intent, but rather, according to

eastern customs, were very polite as they asked, "Who art thou?"

With all their care to hide their real purposes John was too shrewd for them. It may be that some of his disciples, greatly pleased with what they were hearing day after day, concluded among themselves that their leader was the Messiah, and started a report to that effect. To all such rumors John put an end when he plainly denied it saying, "I am not the Christ."\*

It would appear that another report had been going the rounds, claiming that the Preacher, in accord with the words of the prophet Malachi, was Elijah and that the ancient seer had returned from heaven to preach to the people on the very spot where he went up to glory.† So these men put a second question and asked John, "What then? Art thou Elijah?" This John also strongly denied.

Many Jews believed that when Elijah

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\*John 1: 19-28.

†Mal. 4: 5.

did come back to earth, a prophet, foretold by Moses as like unto himself, would return with him. So the third question was asked, referring to this prophet, when they said, "Art thou then the prophet?" Again came the answer, "No."

The men were puzzled. Not being able to locate this great man of the wilderness, they at last put this general question, "Who art thou? that we may give answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?"\*

This was John's time to tell what was uppermost in his mind. He did not care about their knowing *who* he was, but he was quite willing that they should know *what* he was. So he repeated the words of Isaiah.† "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah."

It is worthy of note that John did not claim to be the "Word," but simply the

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\*John 1: 22.

†Isa. 40: 31.

voice. As such how the "Word" honored him even to the end! It was not John's power as a man, but his message as the "voice" of Another, the Christ, that gave his words power in the hearts of the people.

But this claim these bigoted and blind men from Jerusalem did not see, or they might have had cause for their view charging him with defaming the name of God. Not satisfied with what they had so far learned, they again asked John, "Why baptizest thou, then, if thou be not the Christ, nor Elijah, neither that prophet?" He did not answer their question, but took this chance to declare the Christ publicly for the first time. He said to them, "I baptize with water; but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose shoe-latches I am not worthy to unloose."

For some reason this unknown Person who was in their midst did not interest these men from Jerusalem. They were after John, and not having succeeded in

getting anything from the Preacher worth taking back home that evening, they returned down-hearted and ashamed to meet their elders.

However anxious Jesus was to begin His work, another day had to pass without taking it up. For it was left to John to proclaim Him and point Him out. He was unknown to all save John. The manner of John's speaking in this instance makes it quite certain that on the day of the baptism none but John and Jesus saw the dove and heard the voice from heaven. If the people had seen and heard as John did, then they would have known at that time the One who had been divinely appointed.

The next day, however, while John was standing and talking with some of his disciples, Jesus, as if to give the Preacher a chance to point Him out to those with whom he spoke, drew near. As He had moved back and forth quietly among the people, all they saw was a quiet, beautiful young man with great dignity and grace; but John saw more

than this in Him. In words that must have thrilled the hearts of all those who heard and had been so long and earnestly expecting the Christ, John pointed out the Messiah by saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is become before me: for He was before me. And I knew Him not: but that He should be made manifest to Israel, for this cause came I baptizing with water. And John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him. And I knew Him not: but He that sent me to baptize with water, He said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending and abiding upon Him, the same is He that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."\*

Whether even John understood all he said in this full testimony at this time is

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\*John 1: 29-34.

hard to decide. At least his hearers did not. As they now looked upon this noble, erect man they hardly thought of Isaiah's account of the Messiah who was to come and be as a lamb led to the slaughter. They were all dreaming of an earthly king, and perhaps the face and manner of this One was all too mild to stir any thoughts of His being their new earthly leader.

The next day John was standing and talking with two—the one John who afterwards was the evangelist, and Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Some little distance away, in His quiet manner while filled with deep thought, Jesus walked within view of the three. John looked intently upon Him and thus gained the attention of the other two as he said, "Behold the Lamb of God." They were left to fill in with their own minds that this is He who was to take away the sins of the world as the lamb of sacrifice up at Jerusalem took away the sins of the people.

These words of the Preacher cost him

two of his best disciples, for at once they followed Jesus, and John was having his first taste of decreasing while the Master was increasing. The two who followed Jesus were longing for a guide, a teacher, one who could perfect the work already begun in them. It was but natural, then, that they should hope to find such in the One pointed out to them.

Jesus then withdrew and went up to Jerusalem to attend the passover. Perhaps John's meetings closed in the wilderness and all attended the feast. Then John went back to the east side of the Jordan to a place called Enon, while Jesus began work on the west bank of the northeastern part of Judea, somewhere not far from John. Where John was laboring there was much water and John was baptizing, as before, a great many people. Jesus too was where there was water, and his disciples were baptizing those who sought to follow this new Leader.\*

Though these men preached so near

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\*John 3: 22.

each other, no word on record shows there was the least feeling of jealousy between them or any reference to each other save that which would honor the other.

When it was noised abroad that Jesus was out in the country the common people came to hear Him gladly. Many from Jerusalem and the regions round about gathered to listen to His gracious words, drink from this new fountain of truth, and be baptized in the waters near by. This new gathering of the people stirred up hatred again among the Jews at Jerusalem, and with the intent of working up strife between John's disciples and those following Jesus these men came into the Baptist's camp. They began to talk to his disciples and to say to them that Jesus was a greater man than their leader, for, when He was up at Jerusalem over the late feast and at other times, He did miracles which their teacher had not done. To such an extent did these evil-minded men work up the feelings of John's disciples that a

number came to their leader and asked, "Teacher, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him."\*

Poor, troubled disciples! They declared that their leader bore witness to the Great Teacher, and yet they could not see why He should increase so quickly and they not continue to grow after so long work. John very tenderly answered his anxious ones in words so sublime that one hardly gets their full meaning even after dwelling upon them for a time. Expressing the thought in a somewhat enlarged form and dwelling on some thoughts by repeating them, his words were something like these:

"Do not be surprised, my dear disciples, that Jesus' influence should grow so fast; this is just as God would have it be. Neither He nor I can do any good work unless it be from heaven. Do you not recall how I as His herald have told you time after time, that I was simply

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\*John 3: 26.

the forerunner of the Messiah? My work is now nearly done. The fact that men are following after Jesus is only proof to me that in my pointing Him out as the Lamb of God I made no mistake; for now I know that God prompted me to do it. No one can do a higher work than what God has assigned him. I was sent into the world to proclaim the coming Messiah, and now that I have done this I have no thought of trying to do more. Do not feel sorrowful! Have I not often said to you that I was just His herald going before Him? that I was but a voice telling you of the real One who was at hand? that I was but a sandal-bearer to the great King and really not worthy of that place? It may seem very strange to you that I should thus be satisfied in my work, but stop! It has been my precious privilege to prepare the people for this Mighty One. As the best friend of the Bridegroom, the Messiah, it has been my delight to prepare the bride, His new church, by calling the people to repent; in seeing the people

gather about Him and join themselves to Him, my brightest hopes are reached. This is all just as God wants it, and I can only be happy and thankful that I have had the privilege of doing the humble part I have. And let me say to you now, once for all, that from now on I must decrease and He must increase."

## XVII.

### IN PRISON.

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JOHN was but a man and had feelings and desires just like other men. Holding this fact in mind, it must have been a severe trial, perhaps the greatest of his life, to say of Another, "He shall from henceforth increase, while I myself must decrease." It took a man of much courage to declare that on the other side of the Jordan, in a part of the country from which many of John's disciples came, there was a new and a greater Preacher, One who would have greater power over the hearts of men than he had. Who has not lived through something of the same kind in life? Yet John was one of the greatest of men because he bore this great load without a murmur. In fact, by reading closely, one is led to conclude that he rejoiced and was glad that it was so.

What love and what loyalty to Christ!

Not satisfied with what he told his disciples of Christ increasing, he seemed to urge them to follow the Messiah by telling them more about the One who was to absorb all his work; for at a later time he said to them, "He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh: He that cometh from heaven is above all. What He hath seen and heard, of that He beareth witness; and no man receiveth His witness. He that hath received His witness hath set his seal to this, that God is true. For He whom God sent speaketh the words of God: for He giveth not the Spirit by measure. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."\*

Nor did John slacken in his zeal to get people ready for the kingdom. He preached just as plainly as ever before

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\*John 3: 31-36.

and pointed out sin just as clearly. They looked upon him as a prophet sent from God, and so strong was his hold upon their hearts that rulers did not even dare to touch him. In this safety as well as the triumph which he seemed to gain over self in favor of Christ he had a boldness which made him fearless of anything and caused his words to strike terror into the hearts of all, whether ruler or ruled.

In this fearless spirit John one day most severely denounced Herod the governor of Galilee. This ruler, Herod Antipas, by his full name, was the son of Herod the Great, spoken of in the first chapters of this book. Canon Farrar says he was the "pettiest, meanest, and weakest" of all the small rulers that Palestine ever had. He was a Jew by faith and belonged to a family who sought to found a kingdom apart from his nation, one that was to eclipse even the reign of Solomon for splendor. So it was then that this son Antipas was building palaces and getting ready for the time when

he hoped to have all this dreamed-of power.

Antipas was cowardly and short-sighted and often weak when he should have shown true manly strength for his own interest if for no other cause. He led a most wicked life and sought to satisfy every desire of his body, be it right or wrong. Even when he knew at the time that his actions were wrong and would hurt himself more than anyone else, he was still easily led by others to do the wrong.

He first married an Arabian princess, the daughter of Aretas, king of Petra. Later he entered upon another marriage with Herodias, the details of which to some extent should be given to understand that at which John the Baptist was striking in his preaching.

This Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus (Ar-is-to-bu-lus), a well-trained and cultured son of Herod the Great and Mariamne (Ma-ri-am-ne). She was of noble family, was a sister to king Agrippa I., and is said to have

possessed great beauty and shrewdness, but had few of the other good traits of her family. She was heartless, cruel, fearless, and during her life carried out many evil plans. She was first married to her uncle Herod Philip, this being done at the request of Herod the Great. At the time of this marriage there was every prospect of Philip becoming king of Palestine, and in that way she would become a queen. But affairs of state changed. Her husband was disowned by his father and driven from the realm. All Herodias sought after was gone. She and her husband had to move to Rome to get away from the hatred of her brothers, and there they lived as private citizens. Philip liked the quiet life and refused to join his wife in any underhanded plan or any war they might wage through which to gain a crown. Disgusted with the tame life her husband was pleased to follow, she began to plan in secret a marriage with some one who could give her the place of a queen.

Fortune soon favored her wicked

scheme. Antipas came to Rome on some business, and of course was given a home by his brother Philip and his wife Herodias. She at once set to work with all her wily charms to entrap their guest in her unholy love, and she succeeded; for it is almost needless to say that Antipas was of such a character that he had no smiting of conscience in being willing to take away his brother's wife. Herodias agreed to go back to Palestine with Antipas, taking with her her daughter Salome on the following terms: As soon as her new husband reached his kingdom he was to divorce his lawful wife and then exalt his new love instead.

Philip seems not to have made any fuss about this new move when it came to his notice. Perhaps, being glad to get rid of such a wicked woman on the one hand, and feeling sure that his brother had the worst of the bargain and would find it out later, he rested easy in the quiet life he enjoyed.

But such a marriage was against both Jewish and Roman law and custom, to

say nothing about the self-respect which would be lost thereby. When the three reached Tiberias, the home of Antipas, and the marriage feast was started, all Palestine was shocked. As far as the daughter of Aretas, Antipas's first wife, was concerned, she had heard of the conduct of her unfaithful husband before his return, and, not wishing to have the insult cast blankly in her face, took the matter of divorce into her own hands. She sent word to Rome asking if she might visit beyond Jordan eastward. Herod Antipas, thinking she wanted a change of scene and climate, granted her request. When she was well out of reach of her husband she sent word to her father to come after her. At once he sent some generals of his army and brought her home. No sooner was she safe in the Arabian court than her father declared war against Antipas. So it was that the echoes of the marriage feast in honor of Herodias hardly had died away before rumors of war were heard from the east.

Antipas at once put soldiers east of the Jordan to meet Aretas. While these men were thus stationed, daily a number of them passed the camp grounds where John was preaching. Thus he came in full touch with the great evil that was being carried on in high places in Galilee. Because of their sense of right, the Jewish soldiers had little heart to fight for Herod, and many of them, thinking that perhaps the Preacher of the wilderness was Elijah, came to him as a prophet to know how the struggle with Aretas would end. No doubt, too, many a one wanted to have some hope or courage given him.

John cared little how the war would go. Neither did he fear to preach against the scandal which, as a great cloud, rested upon the nation. He not only told of the sin of the king and queen, but laid bare their evil ambitions to gain power and their wicked plans to attain to it.

These words reached the ears of the king. At once his ire was aroused. But

he feared the people. In order to be able to watch this matter more closely it may have been that Antipas with his bride and court moved to one of the palaces not far away from where John was preaching. Some move at least was made by the king which stirred up John's heart more than ever. With plainest words he cried out against their wickedness and declared that the curse of God would fall upon them as a nation, and war with Aretas would not be a success. The people became restless. They sided in with John and against the king. Murmurs were heard on every hand.

John's favor with the people kept him out of the royal hands for a season. In fact, Antipas, hiding his real purposes, in a blinding sort of a way, asked John to come to his palace, for he himself would hear him preach. He tried to make John feel that he himself was a seeker after truth and right.

John went. But he was not used to kings' courts and the much manners observed at such places. He was a

stranger to soft clothing and more so to soft and smooth words. He never had praise, and much less flattery, for one who was living in open sin in such a manner as his royal hearers were. The glitter of the court did not confuse him the least bit. But with a steady eye and a steadier finger he looked and pointed direct to the king and queen as he brought down in mighty force words of justice and judgment upon their heads. Like driven raindrops in a blinding storm did the fiery words of John fall upon the king and queen. He spared them not. He told the king to send away his wicked wife, the one who brought all this disgrace upon him and their nation. In words that never died in the ears of the queen John at last in the height of his address said, "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife."\*

John's speech was not without effect. The king was conscience smitten. But from this he soon rallied. Then came hidden anger at such words. But John

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\*Matt. 14: 3-5, Luke 3: 19.

was allowed to return to his camp not injured. Antipas feared the people.

Shortly after this the king had to march against the army of Aretas. He disliked going out of his country and leaving such a man as John loose to talk and do as he pleased. He weighed the matter some and finally decided he would risk the anger of all the people rather than the work of the Preacher. It would be easy to work up a rebellion and that would bring defeat with Aretas sure. Believing he was choosing the lesser of two evils he sent a body of soldiers to John's camp. Perhaps it was nighttime when all were asleep. They sought out the faithful man of God, took him quietly away and marched him twelve miles south and lodged him in a prison dungeon of Machærus.

## XVIII.

### A MESSAGE OF LOVE.

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THE free life which John had led in the wilderness ill fitted him for the one that was now upon him. It was like catching an old eagle and shutting him up in a cage. Yet John's great heart controlled his mind and he learned some good lessons during the weary months he passed within prison walls. It was during this time that he endured the hardship of being alone, having nothing to do but to pass the time and think of God, and seek to know God's purposes in thus taking him from his work. Many of God's faithful servants have had to learn this lesson, that God at the proper time can carry on His work without them as well as with them.

The prison was east of the Dead Sea on a line almost directly eastward from Bethlehem. Nature herself had made a strong fortress at this place in the strong.

rocky cliff that had arisen above the hills and mountains about it. The king had built a palace there, under the floors of which were the prison chambers. Dark, damp, and gloomy were these underground rooms in which perhaps the man of God had to spend his days. Overhead was everything bright and merry; beneath all was darkness and despair. In the lower dungeons not even light was admitted.

It would appear that a part of the time John was allowed to be in one of the cells on a level with the floor of the palace. In that case he could look out and see the Dead Sea in the distance, the Jordan with its banks filled with so many pleasant memories. How he must have thought of the years spent in this region and of the God who was so near to him all the time. What freedom he then enjoyed! How strange, too, that all this was his without any earthly power to protect him. And stranger still, now, that with the crowds who flocked to hear him

preach there seemed to be no one and no way to free him from his prison life.

There was John alone in the cruel clutches of a king who wanted to put him to death, but feared the people.\* No doubt his suffering was something beyond record. Jesus seems to have known somewhat of how awful was the cruelty inflicted upon him for these words, "They did to him whatsoever they pleased,"† tell much more than the reader to-day can imagine. What must have been the neglect, the insult and the torture which that cruel queen through her servants did inflict upon this faithful servant of God. This was made all the worse because with all her urging the king would not behead John on account of the high respect he held for him.

The war was over. Antipas came back and made his home for a long time at this palace where John was in prison. It would appear, too, that now and then he would send for John to come into his

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\*Matt. 14: 5.

†Matt. 17: 12.

presence either to amuse some of his court by his speeches or else that the king might know more about "the kingdom at hand" and his chance to have an interest in it. What is so pleasing at this point is that no matter for what purpose John was brought, though pale, wan and thin, he never failed to send a shaft of sharp words home to his cruel master for living as he was. It was the old story of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan against each other in the meeting of these two men. And even if John felt that one of these times his head would drop for his plain talk, yet he never failed to declare the truth. What a noble soul was shut up in that prison!

Though in prison John did not give up his work. Besides his talks to Herod he had more or less access to some of his disciples who came to see him often.\* To them he spoke words of comfort and courage and gave them direction how to proceed in his absence. He had the

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\*Matt. 9: 14; 11: 2; 14: 12.

pleasure of knowing that many of them proved true to him in this dark hour. But while they sought to follow out their master's teachings they soon drifted into strict forms and lost much of the spirit which John himself imparted to them. They even carried their formal worship so far that it was as hard work to live up to their ideas of right as it was for the Pharisees to live up to their many, many rules of life. This slowly drove away the crowd that came to hear John's disciples preach. They sought a gospel that had more love and tender words, and gathered to hear Jesus.

Still there were a number who never forsook John. These often came to the prison and told what was going on at Jerusalem and elsewhere. He was always glad to hear it all, and especially that part which told what Jesus was doing. As the disciples would tell their teacher of the miracles which were being done in Galilee and noted how Jesus was living and doing they began to doubt a little whether what He was doing was right.

“For,” thought they, “Jesus and His disciples do not fast; they pay no attention to some of the laws of the Jews; He teaches the Scriptures in a way that was never before heard of in Israel; He cries down some of the oldest customs of the Jews.”

It must be remembered that John's disciples were looking at Jesus not in the light of to-day, but in the small light which they themselves had. No doubt these disciples (even if John himself did not have) had an idea of Jesus making a bold stroke for the Jewish crown and driving away all earthly foreign powers from their Holy Land. Instead of any move of this kind, Jesus was calmly going about teaching the people to love each other, to love their enemies, and to do many things quite opposite to what they expected. During this time Jesus spoke little against the sins of the king or others. He was very easy on some points of religion where John's disciples felt he should be strict. He was not particular whether he showed favor to

Jew or Gentile—either as they came was blessed. Sinners felt free to come to Him and it looked to them as if He liked their company better than that of the so-called pious Jews. It was a common thing for Him to eat with these outcasts of Jewish society. Once He actually showed favor to a Roman officer.\* He even went so far as to spend two days teaching the hated people of Samaria as at the well and then in their city He met them.† And to cap the climax of His work which seemed so wrong to John's disciples, He dined and lodged with a despised taxgatherer and called one of them to be an apostle.‡

A strange story to pour into John's ears at this trying time of his life. Add to this that Herod Antipas was still secure on his throne; that the Pharisees were more haughty than ever, and that Jesus Himself, whom John had pointed out to be the New King, made no effort to possess the waiting crown of the Jews,

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\*Matt. 8: 5-10.

†John 4.

‡Matt. 9: 9-13.

and it is easy to see that John might at times wonder how this all was going to turn out.

Still he never doubted but that the "kingdom of heaven was at hand." Yet he was puzzled. How could such a course as Jesus was taking bring about this new kingdom? Few can know the struggles which John was passing through. Satan was present tempting him daily, now that he was in prison, to give up his faith in God and the Son he so boldly pointed out. John felt the burden of his prison life and his heart went out to know if the millions who were in the bonds of sin were going to have prospect of liberty afterwhile. Not so much the past as the future of Jesus and his work was weighing upon his mind.

By all such thoughts, along with the reports which his disciples brought to him, John was led at last to make inquiry and know direct from the Master Himself the truth of the matter. He sent two trusty disciples to ask just one simple, pointed question of Jesus: "Art

Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?"\*

The two disciples found Jesus in the midst of a multitude, many of whom were giving Him their deepest devotions. What a contrast that was with the few faithful ones who still clung to John! Though their hearts were made heavy with such thoughts, they did not delay, but gave Jesus their message. He did not reply to their question. But turning to the many around Him, among whom were always to be found the blind, the lame, the deaf and the dumb, He beckoned them to draw near. Then he repeated to the two these words of prophecy concerning the Messiah, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert."† He bade the two to step back a little and to

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\*Matt. 11: 2-6

†Isa. 35: 5, 6.

observe. Turning to the afflicted ones He healed them all and sent them away happy and believing.

This done, He turned to the two who had been looking on greatly wondering, and said, "Go your way and tell John the things which you do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in me."\*

The crowning part of the message to John was that the gospel was being preached to the poor. This was John's great concern. How full of love and mercy even to the Baptist must the message have been. "Go and tell John these things," said Jesus. "Tell him, moreover, that I know how he is tempted; but let him comfort himself with the thought that he who holds fast his faith in spite of fiery trials and does

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\*Matt. 11: 4-6

not reject the kingdom of God because of its small beginnings and still, spiritual gentleness, so different from the worldly power and glory expected, already has the blessings it is sent to bring.”\*

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\*Ewald.

## XIX.

### A MARTYR'S CROWN.

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No hint is left on record as to how John received the message from Jesus. His end was at hand, and there was little time to send a reply. However, it is a unique and yet lovely comment on his life that he lived in such a true and pure realm that Herod had great regard for him and at times was prompted by his words to live a better life. The king knew that John was right and he wrong; he knew that truth is mightier than error; and thus John, though a prisoner in a tyrant's prison, still governed his royal keeper.

As for Herodias, she looked upon John as a stubborn man who had been disturbing the peace greatly. Had he been, according to her notions, a man of reason, he would have kept quiet and not risked his life by telling other people, and especially her of her sins. She was an-

gered beyond measure because John was allowed to live. She knew that he had a strong power over the king and feared that if he (John) lived a while longer she herself might lose her place when her husband in a fit of goodness would take a notion to put her away. This made her bent not only on having vengeance for the past but also on getting rid of the Preacher as soon as possible for future safety. Hence she was just waiting. The first chance would find her putting him out of the way.

Among the Roman governors it was a custom to have a feast in honor of the day when they came upon their thrones. The Herods had been apeing after this heathen custom and for thirty years Antipas had these annual feasts. He also had large banquets on his birthdays. One of these followed closely the events of the last chapter.

At this time Antipas was making his home in his castle at Machærus, perhaps because he could better direct his army in watching the angry Aretas. The

usual great feast was prepared. The chief men of the army, along with the lords and first men of Galilee and Perea and some Roman officers, were invited.

This royal family always had great wealth and they took great pleasure in making a show of it in fine palaces and sumptuous feasts. Their banquet halls were a lavish display of flowers, bright lights, tables spread with the most costly food, and wines of the rarest vintage, all in the greatest plenty.

Mirth and revelry were the order of the day. Plays, dances and games afforded sport for the guests, no matter at what cost of suffering for the persons who thus served them. Not an uncommon thing at such feasts were the dancing girls, dressed in a manner not becoming a lady. At these feasts a woman of good repute would not be seen. So the reader can easily form some idea of the class of persons these dancing girls were, and also the low level of life to which Herodias was willing to send her daughter in order to gain her evil ends.

When the king and his men were well filled with wine and some of them were drunken, Salome came in before them without being invited. She was dressed gayly, and the very flush of her youth and beauty in the eyes of her drunken admirers made her dance a great success. Herod, under the influence of wine, was nearly wild with delight at a pleasure so unexpected to them all.

At such times it was a custom to make presents to the dancers for their favor. Herod, with his reason dethroned, thinking to make his wife's daughter a present becoming her station, and forgetting that he held his own throne at the will of Rome, rashly vowed that he would give her anything she should ask even to half of his kingdom. He was too bewildered to know that what he was offering was not his to give.

It is not unlikely that Salome, if she had followed the bent of her own desires, would have asked for a portion of her step-father's realm. But fearing to decide the matter, lest she go astray

and afterwards regret it, she hastened to her mother and asked what she should demand of the king.

Here was a chance for Herodias. It is true that now through her daughter she might secure to herself a part of the kingdom on such terms as would have given her in some degree a lasting place. But no. This was also a time to get rid of him who for so long a time had made her sins appear like scarlet to her. Revenge was far sweeter at this time than place and power. What greater boon could be hers than to know that he was out of the way. So, like the tiger which with the smell of blood already in the nostrils leaps forth upon his prey, Herodias now darted forward and told her daughter to demand the head of John the Baptist on a charger. Fearing lest the king might change his mind and break his oath, Salome returned in haste\* to the banquet hall while the mad revel was still on and

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\*Mark 6: 25.

startled the king by a demand thus black and demon-like.

The charger\* might have been some common platter used for serving food, but it was more likely that it was one of the golden dishes which graced the table of the king.

When the young girl made her demand the heartless lords and officers gave a shout of joy to think that they should be witnesses to any such thing as this. Not so with Herod. The demand at once sobered him. Thoughts in great conflict raged in his bosom. What was to be done? He was vexed at the mean advantage taken of him by his wife, for he readily saw that this was not Salome's doings, but her mother's. Though at times he felt like having John beheaded, still he feared the people. Then to have a man so honored among the people, so given to a life of the true and good, slain without trial or just cause, seemed very wrong to his mind. On the other hand, his pride in making

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\*Matt. 14: 6-12.

his word good was of such a nature that he did not want to hurt his influence among his courtiers.

It is true Herod might as well have broken his oath as to take the life of an innocent man. But there arose a point of honor in his mind. He who is a king must not flinch in making his word good, in standing by his oaths, lest he lose power with his subjects.

In the cruel act which he was now about to commit Herod covered his name with all that is mean and low and fiendish. Yet he was but a symbol of every man who outrages the sacred rights of his own home by his drunken life and excuses himself by saying that others tempted him to take the cup, or of others who go into debt to put on that which makes a show and go to ruin as far as wealth is concerned, simply to keep up with the fashions and ways of the world. Wrong is wrong. There are no laws by which one wrong can be made right by doing another wrong. No weakness of one's make-up, even born in him, will

excuse him for going ahead and doing evil because of it.

There was but one thing to be done. A guard was sent to behead John and return in all haste with his head.

Was it night? Most likely, for at such times feasting and drinking and evildoing feel freest. If so, perhaps John was asleep on his prison couch and dreaming that the Deliverer whom he so often spoke of and longed for, had come at last to take him home to glory.

The rattle of keys awakened him. The door swung open. A light so unusual at this time flashed into his eyes and blinded him for a moment. He sat up in bed to await the bidding of the keeper. The gruff words which now greeted his ears, however, were not from the keeper who used to bring his scanty food. A strange voice! And, oh, what a demand! "Arise, bare your neck and bow your head." As these words were spoken the glitter of the sword was seen by John, and for the first time in his life the "shadow of the cross cast by the

shining of the crown always above and beyond it " fell upon the great movement he began in Israel when he started to preach that the " kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Few were John's moments. The headsman gave no words to explain why it must be so. In fact, what could have been said that would have appeared right? Not even an hour for thought and prayer was given the Preacher. The king had bid the servant make haste, and he must hurry back to the royal presence. The damsel and the guests were waiting his return as the final act in the day's pleasures:

There was no one present to give an account of how John met his death or what gleam of light shone from his eyes when the thought of his freedom to be with his God was at hand. But it is not wrong to think that he met his fate in a manly way. He knew his short life was complete; why should he live longer? Like a true soldier of the cross he met his doom. A moment or two in prayer

—perhaps a thought of victory and a shout for joy—the sword fell and his head rolled away from the body.

The deed was done. The hero had his martyr's crown. John died as he lived, bold, daring all for God and his cause. The headsman soon appeared before his royal crowd carrying the head by its long hair. It was at once placed upon a dish or "charger" from off the table and with graceful bow given to Salome. She now, as a waitress at a feast of death, carried it off to her mother.

## XX.

### A PARTING LOOK.

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THAT was an awful closing of a feast,—one the sting of which was ever after to torture Herod's own soul. How must it have been with the more wicked Herodias? Judging from how sin works in the human heart it may be supposed that when she saw the head on the charger there was a moment of joy to know those lips were speechless and those eyes would no longer flash any reproof at her. Yet her eyes for a moment in deep thought turned away from the grim sight. And, behold, as she looked again the old-time sternness seemed to make the features more rigid. Her flinty heart could stand it no longer. She began to faint. Her joy turned to horror and she waved the ghastly object from her presence.

Tradition relates that Herodias ordered John's headless body, left lying in

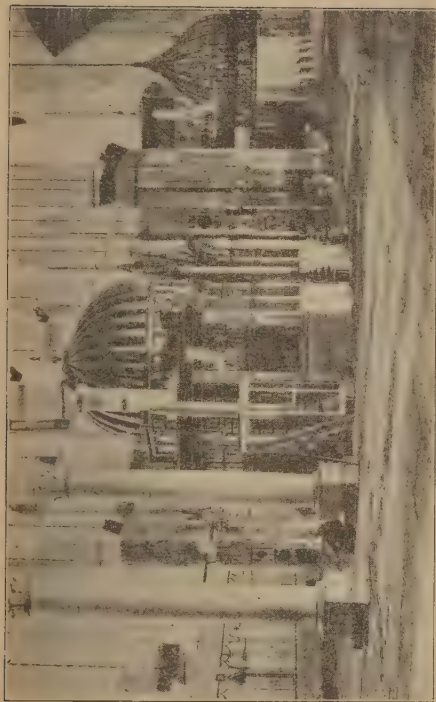
the prison to be thrown over the walls to the dogs and vultures. Whether this be true, or whether it was left in the cell, makes little difference. The disciples of John, hearing of his sad death, came, secured the body and carried it away to burial. Perhaps Herod, through a feeling of sorrow, dealt thus kindly with them.

It was a sad funeral.\* The poor disciples who had followed the Preacher could not help but feel that the good and great work which he had begun, the real purpose of which they so little understood, was now brought to a sudden but certain end.

The place of burial is not known. Somewhere in that region, all unknown to Israel, God by His own hand had buried Moses. And now, for some reason, the disciples who laid John away did not tell the place of resting. But in this God was leading; for by not knowing where John was buried his disciples would not go to the grave and

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\*Matt. 14: 12.



Tomb of John the Baptist at Damascus. The Place of Burial is not Known.



lament over his early death, and would the more readily follow Jesus.

John needs no tombstone to keep his life fresh in the minds and hearts of those who come after him. His good work is told over and over wherever the story of Christ is given. Paul perhaps spoke in the fewest words the highest praise that could be given any one when he said of the beloved Baptist who seemed to die early in life, "John fulfilled his course."\*

Never after this did Herod have any peace. The look of John, who so squarely told him of his sins, haunted him wherever he went. When later he heard of the work of Jesus he at once said to those near him, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works are wrought by him."† What torments must ever after have racked his soul! For Herod knew well enough that a prophet like John coming from the dead would not

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\*Acts 13: 25.

†Matt. 14: 2.

be held back by bolts and doors, stone walls and dark prisons, but would go wherever he chose, not keeping account of kings and rulers. Then what would become of his guilty self?

The rest of the story of Herod and his family must be made just long enough to show the reader the end of these three. Soon after John's death Antipas moved back to his home on the sea of Galilee. In a short while Salome was married to Philip the tetrach, an uncle and an old man who in a few years died without leaving any children. Salome came back to her mother. As years went by Herodias became more evil and filled with a very violent temper. Seeking to gain certain ends in her jealous rage for more power and fame, she urged her husband to go to Rome, and press his claims against her own brother, Herod Agrippa I. The outcome was that Herod Antipas lost the kingdom he had and was banished into Spain in the year 39. Some writers say that Herodias was offered pardon for the part

she played in the plot that ended thus, the king telling her that her own brother whom she had plotted against had secured the same for her. She rejected the liberty, however, and in her old age followed her banished husband into his lonely life. Both died in dishonor and unknown.

Salome was married a second time to a cousin by whom she had three sons. What really came to her in life is not known. Whether she suffered because of her part in the wicked plan to behead John cannot be told. A legend tells that in time she sought her mother in her banished life. On her journey she was crossing a river that was frozen over. The ice broke and she sank to her neck, when the ice united. There she hung for a short time in great agony. At last life was ended by her head being cut off by the ice.\*

But let the last look be upon John the Baptist. And in doing so cast away at the very beginning any thought of re-

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\*Niceph. H. E., i, 20.

gret because of how his life ended. To be a success in God's eyes, whether life be short or long, is the only true view of living. The world might say that John's life was a failure and the more so because he began a work that soon passed away for a still greater one. But his greatness stands out still the more because he was willing to take up the burden of that beginning, and when that was done he was ready to decrease and go off to glory. Many a one would have fretted under the same plan of life.

There is nothing so gracious to any one as to find his place in life and then to work there steadily for God and His cause. To do this in the right spirit is the greatest blessing of a happy and contented life here on earth, and the surest way for eternal glory. What made life more to John, and gave him such a splendid record before God and man is the fact that he made God's kingdom his first purpose in life. If a reader of these lines is in doubt about his present calling being the right one with God, he may

know by simply making his first purpose the seeking of the kingdom of heaven. That means more, though, than many at first think. Many flatter themselves when they have accepted Christ that they have sought the kingdom first. A deeper meaning is back of the Savior's words. He meant to teach that the good of the kingdom, by pressing it upon others, should be made the first and only purpose of life everywhere and all the time. To the real follower of Jesus worldly pursuits in all their demands stand second. He seeks to place the kingdom in the hearts and lives of others and the needed things are added as he carries this work forward.

But the story of this noble life would be incomplete without noting another thought which John so plainly taught. His story was, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Jews were looking for this kingdom; John said it was at hand. Christians to-day are looking for heaven when they die; but Jesus taught that it is here now to every one who will enter.

Both John and Jesus offered a kingdom of present, earthly good, and not a distant, future blessing. They taught that men need not strive and toil here in sorrow and pain and that heaven would come to them after while. Heaven with all its joys is for them now—in this life. John said, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus declared, "The kingdom of heaven is within you" and Paul taught, "The kingdom of heaven is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Thus it may be seen that the forerunner, the Master Himself and the apostle Paul all taught the same great truth.

It is usually taken, too, that "kingdom" means to have rule over or to govern. In this sense, then, the kingdom of heaven is that life in God which permits Him to direct it and have full control over it. The will of man is wholly subject to the will of God and this through the work of the Holy Spirit. This idea was fully taught by Jesus when he said, "If a man love me, he will keep

My words; and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make our abode with him."\* To be living with Jesus always and having our wills wholly in His, means a far different life from any that this world can give.

But it would not be just to John to close without noting the esteem in which he was held by Jesus Himself. John often spoke of the Savior and pointed Him out to the people. He did all he could to help along the kingdom.

On the other hand, Jesus said very little about men, but put his efforts in teaching precious truths. But after the disciples from John were returning, Jesus turned to His hearers and spoke in the highest terms of His forerunner.† Thinking some of them had also heard John, He spoke to them after this manner:

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Did you expect to find a man who was not stayed and steady in his

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\*John 14: 23.

†Matt. 11: 7-19.

life, but easily moved as one of the reeds which grow so tall and spindling along the banks of the Jordan, and is moved by every breath of wind that comes along? That was not John. He was a solid rock and could not be moved either by your coming to hear him, or by the cruelty which a king might inflict upon him even in the cell. Surely you did not expect to find a man dressed in soft clothing,—oh, no, such live in the palaces of the country and not out in the wilds. Their raiment is not only soft but they themselves do not have the strength of manhood that enables them to stand against sin. They like an easy life given to much sin. John chose a stern life, seeking not to sin. I know your desires, my dear people. You went to listen to one who lived as simple a life as the poorest of you and whose keen speech and loving heart showed you the way to the kingdom.

“My beloved people,” continued Jesus, “John was a great man. He was greater than any of those who lived before

Me and spoke of My coming. In fact, so great was he in the eyes of God that men of old were inspired to speak of him as My forerunner. But he was more than a prophet. He it was who saw the kingdom and pointed it out to you. He battled with the powers of sin as found in your hearts before I began My work, in a way no other man ever did. He brought you together and taught you to look for My coming, and thus prepared each of you for My work of love. All this is nobler and better than anything any prophet ever did. Because of his teaching you are to-day pressing into that kingdom with a holy and happy violence."

Yet, dear reader, great as was John, noble as was his place, holy and precious as was his privilege to live so near to Christ, the Master plainly declared that every one who accepts Christ to-day is more highly favored, has greater blessings than John the Baptist had. Jesus did not mean that a Christian would be a better, truer and more sacrificing person.

No, no. Would to God that every one who now names the name of Jesus were as much so as was John. But Jesus meant to teach that our blessings and privileges in Christ are much greater than even John's were.

Are you making use of them? Are you giving up the world for Christ? Are you making a sacrifice of self for Jesus' sake? Are you abiding in Christ, the living vine, willing to be pruned and cleansed by the Word until you bear much fruit for the Master? John bore much luscious fruit. How much more should you,—yes, *even* you!



